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**RURAL MILITARY COUPLES TRANSTIONING POST DEPLOYMENT:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY**

**BY**

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**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
of the Department of Professional Psychology  
and Family Therapy Seton Hall University**

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**SETON HALL UNIVERSITY**  
**COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES**  
**OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES**

**APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE**

**Jeffrey M. Goulding**, has successfully defended and made the required modifications to the text of the doctoral dissertation for the **Ph.D.** during this **Spring Semester 2018**.

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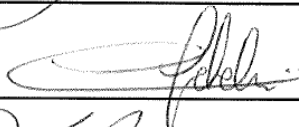
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## **ABSTRACT**

There is no shortage of research and commentary on the difficulties and stressors that result from military combat deployment. The mental, emotional and physical consequences for the deployed soldier are well documented. The struggles faced by their family that stays behind also have a healthy base of research detailing their experience. Less attention has been paid to the impact that these deployments have on their community and even less on the community's impact on the soldier and their family. While rural towns contribute a large number of military personnel nationwide, the deployment experience of the rural couple is not well researched. This study was intended to address the gaps in this research by gathering the experiences of rural military couples and how they perceived their experience of navigating the stress of deployment and post-deployment in their small communities.

The following research questions guided this study: (1) How do rural military couples experience deployment and post-deployment transition? (2) What, if any, are the unique concerns and challenges raised by this specific population? (3) What, if any, are the unique strengths and resources within this specific population? The research was conducted using a qualitative approach to collect detailed information to answer these questions, and understand the lived experience of these rural military couples as they reflected on deployment and post-deployment transition in their small town context.

The finding of this study indicated that the experience of rural military couples is highly conflicted. It is heavily influenced by rural culture and military culture. Each facet of their experience, (deployment, post-deployment, and rural life) carried it's own risk and protective factors. The couple's specifically identified variables of powerlessness, unexpected and unintended change, adaptability, forgiveness, community intrusion, and community support as

factors that influenced their experience. The couples identified them in the context of complex interplay that could put these variables in a paradoxical relationship. Overwhelmingly, the couples found their communities to be a source of strength and given the choice would not change their experience.

Limitations, implications for future research, and clinical implications for rural military couples and psychological professionals are also discussed.

*Keywords:* rural, veterans, rural couples, rural veterans, post-deployment

## **DEDICATION**

To my unstoppable and unwavering wife and partner, Erica, who was always just as committed to this goal as I was, to our beautiful children who inspired me and kept me going at every turn, and to the community of Orderville, Utah, whose strong sense of community and resourcefulness gave me the support and confidence needed to accomplish my goals.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

One of the philosophies that I carry with me as I enter into a therapeutic relationship is that something can be learned even from the most difficult of circumstances. My graduate training and process of dissertation was full of these opportunities to grow from trial and set back as well as gain a sense of triumph from overcoming them. However, it is laughable to think that I could have done this on my own. There were many who offered support and patience in the accomplishment of this goal and were vital to helping me see this through. Unfortunately many will remain nameless, but the gratitude to the many individuals that aided in this accomplishment runs deep.

Dr. Pamela Foley, there are few things that I can say here that will adequately express the impact you have had on my academic success. Your patience in the face of missed deadlines and your long suffering as I chipped away at this always encouraged me. It does not end with just my own success, as you were also instrumental in keeping our program afloat when uncertainty arose. I am fortunate to call myself one of many that have benefitted from your constant and steadfast guidance.

With immense gratitude, I also thank my committee, Dr. Minsun Lee, Dr. Corinne Datchi, and Dr. John Smith were also amazing examples of patience and guidance who led me to a greater understanding of this work and of my selected population. Every note and critique was to make it better and that encouragement was always felt.

Mr. David Neeleman and Mrs. Vicki Vranes who literally made this possible. Without them I would not have even been in a position to start this journey, let alone finish it. My own informal therapist, my mother, Cheree Carter who was with me every step of the way to make sure I never doubted my ability to accomplish this.



Finally, I kindly thank the rural service men and their families for allowing me a small glimpse into their lives to better understand what it means to be from a small town and to feel so deeply the pride that comes from rural America, and what it takes to volunteer to fight for its ideals.

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## **Chapter I: Introduction to the Problem**

### **Introduction**

Individuals enter the ranks of military service for a host of reasons. Some because it is a family legacy, others for the educational benefits, others for reasons of duty and patriotism, and still others for the benefits and honors that may await them upon their return from deployment. Regardless of their reasons for entering the military, when military service men and women return from deployment, they face a host of transitions and situations that can cause distress and create issues that were not anticipated when they first volunteered for service. This is a topic that is the subject of much research and should be a topic of interest for the American populace as they continue to deploy and welcome home service men and women from deployment to overseas conflicts. However, despite the presence of existing research, there is a subset of this population that has been relatively overlooked. Whereas veterans in general may face numerous transitional issues, those in a rural setting, who make up 28% of the total veteran population (Buzza, Ono, Turvey, Wittrock, Noble, Reddy, & Reisinger, 2011), may face yet another varied set of issues that have not been adequately addressed in existing research. The following discussion will attempt to outline some of the additional issues faced by veterans in a rural setting.

### **Background of the problem**

Over two million veterans (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015) have returned home from deployment overseas. The 10+ year wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are having an unprecedented impact on the lives of not only these returning servicemen and women but on their families and respective communities. The period following their return can be difficult for some to navigate, as they have to re-assimilate to civilian life and reconcile potential changes in

their previous family, social, and romantic relationships. These service men and women are attempting to do this while simultaneously dealing with possible mental and physical changes that were a result of their deployment and service. Recent estimates indicate that over 20% of veterans struggled with symptoms consistent with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or depression (Hoge, Auchterlonie & Milliken, 2006). An even more recent study (Rudd, Goulding, & Bryan, 2011) suggests that these numbers are actually much higher, with reported symptoms of “severe anxiety” (35%), “severe depression” (24%), and PTSD (46%) all higher than previously reported by the Department of Defense (DoD) (U.S. DoD, 2010). Given the fact that the U.S. military has been involved in over a decade of constant conflict in multiple war zones, it is little wonder that the rates of PTSD, depression, suicide, and substance abuse have steadily risen among these returning veterans (DoD, 2010). In spite of these recent revelations, discussion and research in certain areas are still lagging behind the needs of veterans as they transition and face the unique challenges that come along with returning from deployment. For veterans in a rural setting this can be especially difficult as they are presented with even more specific obstacles than their urban and suburban counterparts.

According to several studies, deployment creates an increase in psychological distress in veterans, especially upon their return from said deployment (Institute of Medicine, 2010; Kang & Bullman, 2008). Other research goes on to suggest that deployment may also worsen existing psychological and behavioral issues (Bray, Brown & Williams, 2013; Foran, Wright, & Wood, 2013; Hoge et al., 2006; Stappenbeck, Hellmuth, Simpson, & Jakupcak, 2014). Studies with returning veterans have also discussed many specific behavioral health problems associated with the transitional phase after returning from deployment. This includes suicide (Lu, Woodside, Chisolm & Ward, 2014; McCarthy, Blow, Ignacio, Ilgen, Austin, & Valenstein, 2012), substance

use (Bray, Brown & William, 2013; Miller, Reardon, Wolf, Prince, & Hein, 2013; Stappenbeck et al., 2014; Williams, Frasco, Jacobson, Maynard, Littman, Seelig, & Boyko, 2015), academic and professional difficulties (Ackerman, DiRamio, & Garza-Mitchell, 2009; Alfred, Hammer, & Good, 2014; Rudd, Goulding, & Bryan, 2011), issues with stress management (Adler, Bliese, McGurk, Hoge, & Castro, 2011; Finely, Pugh, Noel, & Brown, 2011; Godfrey, Mostoufi, Rodgers, Backhaus, Floto, Pittman, & Afari, 2015), and an increase in violent or aggressive behavior (Stappenbeck, Hellmuth, Simpson & Jakupcak, 2014).

The literature also discusses issues that couples and families may experience during post-deployment transition. Couples and families face issues including marital relationship stress and strain (Allen, Rhodes, Stanley, & Markman, 2011; Baddeley & Pennebaker, 2012; Davis, Ward and Storm, 2009; Farero, Springer, Hollist, & Bischoff, 2015; Foran, Wright & Wood, 2013), reintegrating into family life and routines (Balderrama-Durbin, Cigrang, Osborne, Snyder, Talcott, Slep, & Sonnek 2015; Blow, Curtis, Wittenborn, & Gorman 2015; Davis, Hanson, Zamir, Gewirtz, & DeGarmo, 2015; Jordan, 2011; Knobloch & Theiss, 2012; Lapp, Taft, Tollefson, Hoepner, Moore, & Divyak, 2012), caregiver burnout (Dekel, Goldblatt, & Keidar, 2005) and intimate partner & domestic violence (Marshall, Panuzio & Taft, 2005; Sherman, Sautter, & Jackson, 2006; Stappenbeck et al., 2014). These all paint a picture of a population that needs continued focus in research and treatment application.

However, there is a subsection of the veteran couple population that has received the least attention so far in the literature. Veterans and their families that hail from a more rural areas not only face many of the same challenges of their urban and suburban counterparts, but they also have to deal with added cultural and logistical factors.

Typically people from rural areas have a more difficult time accessing both mental and physical health care simply because they live farther away from medical facilities (Buzza, et al., 2011). Although this can be a major obstacle, there are also cultural factors at work that are often not addressed in much of the research. Rural communities tend to be insular (Endacott, Wood, Judd, Hulbert, Thomas, & Grigg, 2006; Gonyea, Wright, & Earl-Kulkosky, 2014). This means that they are typically committed to the community and feel very comfortable within it and with the people in it, but this also means that they can be somewhat distrustful of outsiders who they believe would tell them how to live or behave (Gonyea et al., 2014). Thus, not only are returning veterans from these areas typically far away from consistent and quality treatment, some cultural expectations may also act as a deterrent to seeking treatment, especially mental health treatment (Buzza et al., 2011; Gonyea et al., 2014; Weeks, Kazis, Shen, Cong, Ren, Miller, & Perlin, 2004). There is also a lack of confidentiality in rural healthcare in general, where of necessity one's provider may also be a neighbor, which can potentially discourage individuals and couples from seeking help (Endacott et al., 2006).

A handful of studies have begun to explore the unique challenges that rural veterans face. These studies have noted that rural veterans must navigate issues with logistics and distance (Buzza et al., 2011; Kirchner, Cody, Thrush, Sullivan, & Rapp, 2004; Nayar, Apenteng, Yu, Woodbridge, & Fetrick, 2012; Wallace, MacKenzie, Wright, & Weeks, 2010), increased risk for psychological issues (Baker, Mott, Mondragon, Hundt, Grady, & Teng, 2015; Mohammed, 2012; Weeks et al., 2004; Whealin, Stotzer, Pietrzak, Vogt, Shore, Morland, & Southwick, 2014) and increased risk for suicide (Lu, Woodside, Chisolm & Ward, 2014; McCarthy et al., 2012). However, no study has yet explored their subjective experience of navigating this transition and

the unique difficulties that exist for them during this important acclimation back to civilian life, especially in the context of how it affects their families, and spouses in particular.

### **Statement of the problem**

The existing literature indicates that individuals from rural areas volunteer for military service at a higher rate than their urban counterparts, and as mentioned they make up approximately 28% of the total veteran population (Baker et al., 2015; Buzza et al., 2011). Yet the research continues to lag behind the need for this population. Not only does coming from a rural background carry a unique set of perspectives and challenges (Endacott et al., 2006; Gillespie & Redivo, 2012; Gonyea et al., 2014; Helbok, Marinelli & Walls, 2006; Schank & Skovholt, 1997), but these can be exacerbated by the transition required when returning from deployment to a foreign conflict (Buzza et al., 2011; Kirchner et al., 2004; Mohamed, 2012; Wallace, MacKenzie, Wright, & Weeks, 2010). The rural context itself creates barriers to receiving treatment for civilians and veterans alike. Some research indicates that residing in a rural area is a risk factor in and of itself (Baker et al., 2015).

There is also a significant amount of research that discusses the various difficulties that couples face as they reintegrate into their relationships following military deployment (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012; Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013; Melvin, Wenzel, & Jennings, 2015). Yet again for those couples that reside in a rural area, the literature is severely lacking. There seems to be a large gap in the research that discusses the unique difficulties of transition post-deployment for military couples in a rural setting. Similar to the challenges faced by individuals returning from deployment to a rural setting, couples may face challenges related to both logistical issues in finding nearby treatment, as well as problems associated with the rural cultural context and the challenges of confidentiality. Therefore, rural couples continue to face



barriers to healthy post-deployment transition that may be above and beyond their urban counterparts, yet there is little research that details their unique experience of this event.

### **Purpose of the study**

The current study sought to fill the gap in the literature through a phenomenological qualitative research design (Moustakas, 1994; Schratz & Walker, 1995) to understand the unique concerns and challenges and the unique strengths and resources that rural military couples face as they navigate the difficulties of post-deployment transition. The findings of this study will assist practitioners in understanding and meeting the needs of this specific population.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by three main questions:

1. How do rural military couples experience deployment and post-deployment transition?
2. What, if any, are the challenges and concerns raised by this specific population?
3. What, if any, are the unique strengths and resources within this specific population?

These questions guided the researcher to discover the perspectives and experiences of the participant rural military couples. It was anticipated that these questions would both more deeply explore and explain factors that have already been discussed in rural military literature (i.e., distance and logistical issues), as well as uncover rural cultural factors that had yet to emerge in the other literature. The current study was also open to those factors and considerations that had yet to be expressed.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Rural.** The U.S. Census Bureau defines rural as "...all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area" (2016, p. 1) An "Urban Area" is defined as an incorporated city or town that has a population of 50,000 or more people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Strictly

defined “rural” indicates a town or city area with 2,499 people or less and an “Urban cluster” as a town or city with 2,500 to 49,999 people. Based on the definition that “rural” encompasses everything outside of an Urban Area, couples residing in towns of up to 49,999 people would technically be eligible for inclusion. This criterion has been used to define rural in other studies with veterans (McCarthy et al., 2012). However, there is more that goes into the rural definition. The US census bureau uses different criteria when it comes to economics and labor markets. For these the terms “metropolitan” and “micropolitan” are used to delineate between rural and urban areas. A metropolitan area has at least 50,000 residents and a micropolitan area has at least 10,000 and not more than 49,999 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). From this definition, non-metro labor markets that are not centered on an urban cluster of 10,000 to 49,999 are considered “nonmetro, non-core” and therefore rural (USDA Economic Research Service, 2016). For the purposes of this study “rural” was classified as any area that falls within the “nonmetro, noncore” criteria set forth by the USDA Economic research service (2016), which is any town of less than 10,000 people whose labor market is not centered on an urban cluster. This was determined using a map provided by the USDA Economic Research Service (2016). The < 10,000 metric has also been used to define rural in other research (Helbok et al., 2006).

**Military Couple.** Rural communities also tend to adhere to more traditional notions of gender roles (Sherman, 2009). Although returning female veterans and those in same-sex relationships undoubtedly experience unique post-deployment relationship challenges, for this initial study a “military couple” was limited to a male serviceman and his female partner who remained home during deployment. This was done for two specific reasons. One, this relationship dynamic is by far the most common in military couples and is the most studied dynamic in the comparable literature (Allen, Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, 2011; Baddeley &

Pennebaker, 2011; Davis et al., 2009). Second, this study was meant to be as straightforward as possible in addressing the population in question. Because the present study was meant to be exploratory in the struggles of post-deployment transition among rural veteran couples, increasing the heterogeneity of the sample would have likely increased the saturation point and potentially diluted the focus of the study.

Previous research has not included parental status as a definitive inclusion or exclusion criterion. Most of the research with military couples have included both couples that did and did not have children. It seems that the typical couple found in the research does in fact have children (Davis et al., 2015; Lapp et al., 2010). However, for the current study the couple's parental status did not determine their eligibility as the research was more focused on their experience as a couple as they navigated post-deployment transitions.

Because the study was primarily focused on the couple and their experience as a unit it is important that they have experienced the deployment and transition together. Only couples that had been together for at least a year and had also been together at the time of at least one of the soldier's combat deployments were recruited.

The study sought to truly understand the lived experience of the transitioning soldier and his spouse, and in particular, recruitment was also limited to those soldiers that had been exposed to combat. The following chapter will detail many of the common issues faced by transitioning veterans and their families. These are exacerbated by exposure to combat (Shea, Presseau, Finley, Reddy & Spofford, 2017), and therefore the couple that is tasked with navigating this transition in the face of combat exposure was ideal for inclusion in this study. It was anticipated that these couples would have a greater understanding of the difficulties of the transition process and therefore would have a depth of experience from which to pull.

Additionally it is important that the couple had a fresh sense of this transition and its challenges. Therefore, only couples that had experienced post-deployment from one of the most recent conflicts, Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation New Dawn (OND), were recruited. The most contemporary studies have focused on this population as well (Shea et al., 2017). Not only are they in the most immediate need of transitional help, but they will continue to be needing help and support for years to come. It was the purpose of this study to focus on the needs of contemporary veterans and their families.

Many of the contemporary studies exploring the experience of military couples are actually done by separating the couples and interviewing them separately (Knobloch, Mcaninch, Abendschein, Ebata, & Mcglaughlin, 2016; Lapp et al., 2010; Nelson Goff, Irwin, Cox, Devine, Summers & Schmitz, 2014). Generally the rationale for this is the legitimate barrier to disclosure that may arise, as the individuals may be less likely to explicitly state certain sensitive information with the spouse present. However, for this study it was important that there be an understanding of how the couple transitioned into deployment and after deployment as a unit. Donnellan, Murray & Holland (2014) conducted a study that interviewed couples together in order to, “allow for the additional data that can be borne out of couples’ interaction with each other in the interviews as they reflect and build on each other’s responses through their dialogue.” This proved to be vital in this study as the couple’s were able to build off of each other’s responses to the questions to create a more comprehensive picture of what it was like for them to experience these events together, through the lens of their rural context.

**Concerns and Challenges.** Anything that the couple identified that made it more difficult in their experience of deployment and post deployment transition were included as concerns and challenges. Participants were free to identify any concerns and/or challenges that

they faced, which were expected to include but not necessarily be limited to logistical difficulties (i.e. distance to nearest medical/psychological facility) and cultural factors (i.e., expectations of self-sufficiency, insular nature of rural towns, etc).

**Strengths and Resources.** Anything that the couple identified as a source of strength or an element of their experience or relationship that eased their transitions was defined as a strength or resource. As with the concerns and challenges, participants were free to identify any source of strength or resource. With rural populations, these were expected to be things like community involvement, religion, rural cultural norms that normalize/value military service, and even familiarity with the use and handling of firearms.

## **Conclusion**

As a result of this study it was anticipated that a fuller and richer picture of the experience of rural military couples would emerge, which would in turn afford a better understanding of how to best provide services to this population. The following chapter will discuss in greater detail the existing literature about military couples and their unique struggles transitioning as a unit as well as the unique struggles of those individuals/couples from a rural setting.

## **Chapter II: Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction**

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA; 2015), more than two million soldiers have been deployed since the events of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent war on terror (OIF/OEF/OND conflicts). This has created an unprecedented effect on the VA and its subsidiaries to service the ever-growing veteran population. Out of necessity, entities like the VA and academic institutions have sought to better understand the needs of this population in several contexts. Much research has emerged, focusing on a number of issues related to the veteran population across these various contexts. This chapter will cover these issues and contexts that are relevant to the present study population. Namely, issues that veterans face as they return from deployment, common issues that are faced by military couples, cultural norms among rural communities that can act as barriers to treatment as well as some potential protective factors. Finally, what is known about the experience of rural veterans will be addressed.

Much of the current research has been focused on the effects of deployment, namely exposure to combat and the resulting problems that arise or are exacerbated as a result of deployment. There is a wealth of literature that exists on these and related issues for returning veterans. However, groups like rural veterans and their unique needs have received less attention, even though their numbers continue to grow (Baker et al., 2015; Buzza et al., 2011).

Another population that has been gaining some attention over the course of the last several years is that of the veterans' personal support network, namely, spouses and family. Researchers have sought to understand what kind of risk and protective factors exist for veterans and, naturally a key area of interest is that of the family's role in post-deployment transitions. The existing literature has described and detailed marital stress and other family relationship

stress that often accompanies deployment (Balderamma-Durbin et al., 2015; Blow et al., 2015; Davis et al., 2009). Veterans' spouses and families also experience a number of changes and adjustments during and after deployment (Allen, Rhodes, Stanley & Markman, 2011; Baddely & Pennebaker, 2012; Davis et al., 2015; Lapp et al., 2010). Therefore, it is important that this element of the veteran's life be understood and considered when discussing the difficulties of transitioning post-deployment.

As for the demographic aspect of the proposed population, rural areas have their own culture, expectations, strengths, and weaknesses. The literature suggests that life in a rural community creates its own challenges for mental and physical health, even in the absence of the added stressors that deployment and combat exposure can bring (Endecott et al., 2006; Gillespie & Redivo, 2012). Veterans who return home to a rural setting must also navigate the cultural as well as logistical challenges that accompany life in a rural town while simultaneously dealing with post-deployment reintegration and family reintegration. This presents a challenging set of circumstances for both the soldier and the family. Not only are rural veterans returning to face the much researched transitional issues of post-deployment, they are also coming home to face the unique culture and challenges of rural communities. Yet, there is a lack of literature describing the subjective, lived experiences of these soldiers and their spouses.

The following sections will review the literature that addresses the common struggles that soldiers face post-deployment, the common struggles of couple transition in general and the role of resilience and adaptability, the common issues for military couples as they navigate post deployment transition, the potential challenges of rural life, and the common issues encountered by rural veterans. The dearth of research regarding rural military couples will also be discussed.

## Coming Home

“You are going to come back changed. It’s not necessarily good or bad, but you will fundamentally be a different person.” (Excerpt from a qualitative personal account, Ackerman et al., 2009, p. 7).

Much like the soldier quoted above, many soldiers come back very different from the men and women they were when they were first deployed. The struggles of returning vets are well documented. The transition back to civilian life is fraught with problems. Soldiers encounter a number of transitional circumstances that need to be effectively navigated to minimize the mental health risks. This section will briefly describe some of the more common issues as well as discuss risk and adaptability factors.

**PTSD.** Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a common problem for returning veterans (Godfrey et al., 2015; Rudd, Goulding, & Bryan, 2011). Studies suggest that up to 93% of female service members and up to 96% of male service members will experience at least one psychologically traumatizing event during their service (Godfrey et al., 2015). Some literature suggests that up to 46% of returning veterans report significant symptoms of PTSD (Rudd et al., 2011). While other studies do not report this high level of incidence, they do report that deployment, and especially exposure to combat, is highly correlated with significant symptoms of PTSD (Adler et al., 2011; Britt, Adler, Bliese & Moore, 2013; Hoge et al., 2006; Vasterling, Proctor, Friedman, Hoge, Heeren, King, & King, 2010). Even the Department of Defense (DoD) supports this conclusion (U.S. DoD, 2010).

Hoge, Auchterlonie, and Milliken (2006) and Vasterling et al., (2010) found that PTSD symptoms were greater in soldiers that had been deployed. In Hoge, Auchterlonie, and Milliken’s (2006) seminal article on this topic, long-term PTSD symptoms as well as other mental health symptoms, such as symptoms of depression and anxiety, were found to be highly



correlated with exposure to combat. Hoge and colleagues (2006) examined surveys that were completed by soldiers upon their return from deployment and then followed up with them 12 months later. Those that had been exposed to combat during their deployment reported significantly higher PTSD and depressive symptoms than those that had not been exposed to combat during their deployment (Hoge et al., 2006). In spite of the high rate of symptomology, they found the utilization of mental health services was poor among this population (Hoge et al., 2006). Vasterling et al. (2010), using a combination of the Deployment Risk and Resiliency Inventory (DDRI) and the PTSD Checklist (PCL), found that the number of individuals reporting symptoms doubled from pre- to post-deployment. The authors go on to report that over time, deployment-related stressors actually predicted an increase in PTSD symptoms (Vasterling et al., 2010).

Much of the research has been focused on Veterans' experience of PTSD symptoms. These studies have found that PTSD symptoms are often comorbid with other behavioral and mental health problems in returning veterans. In addition to their reports of increased substance use, Stappenbeck, Hellmuth, Simpson and Jakupcak (2014) found that PTSD symptoms also increased aggressive behavior. Soldiers who exhibited symptomology consistent with PTSD were more likely to engage in physical aggression post-deployment.

**Other mental health issues.** In addition to PTSD, these same studies also found an increase in several other mental health issues. Specifically, deployment and exposure to combat was also associated with an increase in depression and anxiety (Hoge et al., 2006; Rudd, Goulding, & Bryan, 2011), as well as an increase in reports of other mental health issues, including eating disorders, dissociative disorders, personality disorders and lower overall psychological functioning (Finley, Pugh, Noel & Brown, 2011; Godfrey, et al., 2015). The

exposure to combat and deployment stress takes a mental toll on the individual soldiers as reported in these and other studies (Alfred, Hammer & Good, 2014; Vasteriling, et al. 2010). Deployment has also been associated with lower levels of physical well-being (Britt, Adler, Bliese & Moore, 2013; Godfrey, et al., 2015). Therefore, deployment and combat exposure affect not only mental well-being but also physical well-being. It should be noted that this was often in the absence of potential physical injuries sustained while in combat.

Alfred, Hammer and Good, (2014) also introduced another factor into the issues surrounding mental health for soldiers. They reported that the military imbues soldiers with a sense of stoicism and toughness that is in line with a traditional North American sense of masculinity. However, they also found that this conformity was also associated with lower levels of psychological well-being. The pressure to conform to these traditional masculine norms resulted in feelings of inadequacy and failure among returning veterans (Alfred, Hammer, & Good, 2014).

**Suicide.** Another significant issue faced by veterans is that of suicide. Military veterans are much more likely to consider and attempt suicide than their civilian counterparts (Kang & Bullman, 2008). Recent estimates suggest that suicide is the second leading cause of death, behind heart disease, among active military service members (Rudd, Goulding & Bryan, 2011; U.S. DoD, 2010). Rudd Goulding and Bryan (2011) found that the prevalence rate of suicide was similar to PTSD, reporting that 46% of their sample had thought about suicide and that 7.7% had actually attempted it. Currently, a popular social media campaign has even thrust this to the forefront as a “challenge” to its members. Those who would take on the challenge are encouraged to do 22 pushups a day because it is claimed to represent the number of veterans who daily lose their lives to suicide. It is designed to raise awareness of the mental health issues that

returning veterans face (Willingham, 2016). While the statistic cited in this campaign is more in the vein of anecdotal evidence, more recent estimates by Chapman & Ibrahim (2015) still put this number at about 20 veterans a day who die by suicide, for all combined ages and eras of service (Chapman & Ibrahim, 2015; Shane III & Kime, 2016). Another news article authored by Kime (2016), found similar results as Rudd, Goulding and Bryan (2011), and suggested that up to 40% of post 9/11 veterans have considered suicide at least once since joining the military.

**Substance Abuse.** Deployment has also been associated with an increase in and exacerbation of substance abuse behaviors (Bray, Brown, & Williams, 2013; Stappenbeck et al., 2014; Williams et al., 2015). Bray, Brown and Williams (2013) reported that level of combat exposure was significantly linked to alcohol use. More specifically, those who experienced high exposure were more likely to engage in problematic drinking behaviors. Another more recent article by Williams et al., (2015) further reported that veterans with a pre-existing drinking problem were much more likely to relapse after deployment. Stappenbeck et al., (2014) discovered that those with PTSD symptoms who also abused alcohol were more likely to engage in nonphysical aggression. They were more likely to be verbally aggressive in family and marital relationships, when this had not previously been an issue. Returning veterans have also been found to be at risk for greater illicit drug use, especially if partners or close family members also use (Miller et al., 2013). Therefore, not only were the soldiers more like to engage in substance use and abuse behaviors but they were now at greater risk to use in ways that they previously had not.

**Life on Hold.** Deployment represents a significant disruption in many of these service men and women's lives. Often they must put professional and academic pursuits on hold upon deployment (Ackerman, DiRamio & Mitchell, 2009; Finley et al., 2012). Finley, Pugh, Noel and

Brown (2012) noted that, "...extended combat deployments have been found to interfere with veterans' ability to proceed along expected life and career trajectories, resulting in significant disruption and distress" (p. 150-151). Reintegrating back into work and school can be difficult, especially if they are now dealing with a mental or physical issue as a result of their deployment.

Ackerman, DiRamio and Mitchell (2009) conducted a qualitative study for veterans returning to college campuses after being deployed. Participants reported deployment as a disruptive experience and re-integration into civilian life as one of the toughest issues that they faced (Ackerman et al., 2009). Many who had previously been students now struggled with tasks that they once were able to do, and others now felt as though they were dealing with mental and emotional issues that made it more difficult to re-integrate (Ackerman et al., 2009). Many individuals join the ranks of the armed services in order to get the promised educational benefits from their service. New and worsening mental and emotional issues may nullify one of the main reasons that they enlisted.

The previous section represents the major factors and issues that individual veterans face as they return home from deployment. It is important to continue to explore and understand the diverse and multiple strains that may be operating in the lives of veterans as they transition following deployment. This will help to inform the type of questions that will be asked of subjects in the current study. One of these strains that have also received a lot of attention is that of the veterans' support networks (spouses and families) and how deployment affects them. The following section will discuss the common issues that exist for veterans and their spouses.

### **Military Culture and the Transiting Couple**

Couples are affected by myriad transitional issues inside and outside of the military. Not only the physical and mental issues that arise from deployment but being in the military itself

poses issues for couples. The struggles of transitioning from deployment are detailed below.

However, just service in the military poses unique challenges to the couple that keeps them in a constant state of change and transition.

Life in the military dictates that not only the soldier be ready to go at a moment's notice, but that their family be ready to adapt at the drop of a hat as well. This not only puts strain on the couple's relationship but also affects the ability for both spouses and children to establish and maintain social connections, even with extended family members (DeGraff, O'Neal & Mancini, 2016). Spouses often carry the expectation that they will keep their enlisted soldiers "mission ready." Facilitating this can create a chronic feeling of anxiety, as the families must be ready to support their soldiers without advance notice and without knowing what the soldiers' duties might entail (DeGraff et al., 2016). In order to mitigate the stresses of uncertainty and change that accompanies military culture, there is an added pressure on military couples to be able to facilitate positive interactions with children around change. Poor parental functioning is associated with negative outcomes for children, and these can be magnified in a military context. Spouses often turn to the chain of command and other military families for support. This often results in strong bonds within the military culture, but it can stunt a family's ability to establish supports outside of the culture (DeGraff et al., 2016).

Often the only consistent thing for military families is change, and this can make it difficult to establish continuity in the medical and mental health care that the family receives as well. The transient nature of these professional relationships can have a negative impact on the family and couple's willingness to engage in treatment (Gleason & Beck, 2017). Subsequently, this may also contribute to feelings of stigma around help seeking (Fischer, McSweeney, Wright, Cheney, Curran, Henderson & Fortney, 2016; McFarling, D'Angelo, Drain, Gibbs & Olmsted,

2011) as families can become dissatisfied with the inconsistency of the services they receive. McFarling et al. (2011) explicitly explored how military culture stigmatizes help seeking behaviors, which leads to avoiding the appearance of weakness in the context of substance abuse. Appearing weak can have real world negative consequences for the soldier. Therefore, soldiers are often reluctant to seek treatment, and this can transfer to the spouse as she or he feels the pressure to support the soldier (DeGraff et al., 2016; Gleason & Beck, 2017). Couples must both be aware of their needs and secure enough to seek help to meet these needs in order to adequately deal with the stress of military life in general. Deployment and post-deployment can significantly add to the couple's needs while military culture may continue to discourage the couple from developing adequate skills and the desire to seek formal treatment.

Long term committed couples will inevitably have to navigate a variety of transitions throughout the course of their relationship, be it parenting, illness, loss of employment, frequent relocation, etc. The degree to which the couple successfully navigates this transition will depend on their ability to cope and develop resiliency (Knobloch et al., 2016; Sanford, Backer-Fulghum, & Carson, 2016). The current study focused on the transition post deployment and how vital communication and the admission of mistakes were in being able to overcome the challenges that deployment posed for each couple. This section focuses on the common struggles that accompany post-deployment transition.

**Couples Transitioning Post-Deployment.** Military couples face their own transitional issues when soldiers return from deployment. Knobloch and Theiss, (2012) asserted, “reentry of a service member into the family can be more challenging than the deployment itself” (p. 424). The study reported that both partners are at greater risk for depression, anxiety, PTSD, and relationship distress for six months after a deployment. They hypothesized that this is due to

“relational turbulence” (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012). “Relational turbulence” refers to the difficulty that relationships have during times of transition in general (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012, Knobloch et al., 2016). That is, times of transition cast uncertainty on the relationship because both parties are negotiating it as individuals, and one partner cannot predict how the other will react to the transition (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012). Knobloch et al. (2013) applied this theory to post-deployment transition for military couples and found that the couples also faced significant relational turbulence during post-deployment transitions. Renshaw, Rodrigues and Jones (2008) hypothesized that post-deployment relational turbulence was due to returning soldiers’ depressive symptoms. The authors reported that the returning soldier’s depression may lower his relationship satisfaction, which in turn may cause the spouse to also question the relationship and subsequently exhibit their own depressive symptoms (Renshaw, Rodrigues & Jones, 2008). This process then activates a cycle of uncertainty that affects the quality and stability of the relationship moving forward.

Marriage and family have often been listed as a protective factor for soldiers and their spouses against emotional disorders and posttraumatic stress. This has been found to be true for both military couples (Allen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2011), as well as other trauma-exposed populations (Balderrama-Durbin et al., 2015; Brewin, Andrews, & Valentine, 2000; Davis et al., 2015). This does not mean that there are not transitional issues for the couple as a unit. In fact, several common transitional difficulties have been found within this context. This section will describe the most commonly reported transitional issues reported by the military couples as unit.

Besides the individual transitional issues that have been addressed above, including the introduction of new or worsened mental health issues or even just the process of adjustment back

to routines of civilian life, military couples are now at higher risk of relationship-related issues post-deployment. Research has shown that generally couples post-deployment are at higher risk for intimate partner violence (Blow et al. 2015; Davis, Ward & Storm, 2009). Marshall, Panuzio and Taft (2005) examined the prevalence and cause of intimate partner violence (IPV) among veterans and active-duty servicemen. They found that deployment and especially exposure to combat were positively correlated with IPV. They also found that veterans were more likely to perpetrate IPV if they had also been victims of domestic violence as children. However, this does not explain why the rates are so much higher among veterans. The authors go on to state that depression and PTSD lower the ability to cope and that is when the partner may turn to violence as a maladaptive means to deal with potential marital conflicts (Marshall, Panuzio & Taft, 2005). As previously discussed, veterans are also at greater risk for substance use and abuse (Stappenbeck, Hellmuth, Simpson, & Jakupcak, 2014), which were also found to be positively correlated with greater perpetration of IPV (Marshall, Panuzio & Taft, 2005).

Wives of servicemen are also at greater risk of developing caregiver burden once their husbands have returned from deployment. For those servicemen who are diagnosed with PTSD, their wives' lives tend to revolve around their care and their symptoms (Dekel et al., 2005). This presents a struggle for them to not only give care to their husbands but also maintain their independence. This can cause the wife to feel the burden of care as it affects her ability to not only care effectively for herself, but also for the spouse and other family members that may be in the home (Blow et al., 2014; Dekel et al., 2005)

Couples that had existing issues prior to deployment experience no reprieve from being apart and, in fact, may experience greater distress. Foran, Wright and Wood (2013) found that while combat exposure did not predict increased risk for intent to divorce or separate, it did seem



to exacerbate pre-existing marital discord. Balderrama-Durbin et al. (2015) similarly found that couples that had pre-existing marital issues were more likely to have reintegration problems after the veteran returned home from deployment.

Coping while family members are away represents a significant stressor to spouses and families. Military wives are much more likely to experience depression while their husband is deployed (Davis, Ward & Storm, 2009). This can put a strain on not only the marital relationship but also their relationship with children and social networks. Davis, Ward and Storm (2009) reported that the length of the current military conflicts has made this worse, as soldiers are now serving several tours of duty. Families often experience multiple deployments contributing to a prolonged sense of instability and uncertainty for those that remain at home (Davis et al., 2009).

Once the soldier has returned, often a “new normal” must be found (Lapp et al., 2010). This can be daunting, as many things may have changed for both parties during deployment. Some of the common complaints from returning vets is that they sometimes feel like a guest in their own home, that their children’s attitude toward them seems fearful or indifferent, and that they are now unsure of their role in the family because of their long absence (Balderrama-Durbin et al., 2015).

Individual soldiers therefore have to attempt to navigate both their own transitional issues that they may be facing upon their return, but also may contend with relationship difficulties as they attempt to reintegrate into their marital and family units. The current study sought to take this even a step further to add yet another potential context that can potentially be problematic for effective transitions. The next section will discuss the unique challenges that may be present in a rural setting.

### **Life in a Small Town**

Much of the literature focused on the culture of rural communities is written from the perspective of the clinicians that service these small towns, and the issues that they face while attempting to serve them (Endacott et al., 2006; Gillespie & Redivo, 2012; Gonyea et al., 2014; Helbok et al., 2006; Jameson & Blank, 2007; Mullin & Stenger, 2013; Nickel, 2004; Schnack & Skovolt, 1997). These studies do provide information that reveals the unique culture of rural communities, but they are lacking the direct perspectives of the veterans themselves, which the present study was designed to elicit.

**Challenges.** Small towns tend to have their own culture and their own expectations (Gonyea et al., 2014). Working with this community can be challenging in a number of ways because of the cultural norms within rural settings. Dual roles are difficult if not impossible to avoid, confidentiality is difficult if not impossible to maintain and “everyone knows your business,” you are essentially visible to the entire community (Helbok et al., 2006). Therefore, military couples that are in distress may avoid seeking therapy within their communities because of the dual role that it would inevitably place them in with their therapist. And as other research has indicated, distance may prove to be a prohibitive factor for those who may prefer to seek treatment outside of the community (Buzza et al., 2011; Lu, Woodside, Chisolm & Ward, 2014).

Rural areas also tend to be insular (Gonyea et al., 2014; Helbok et al., 2006). Small town people are often wary and distrustful of outsiders. Rural communities also exert pressure on members to perpetuate the town and rural culture to maintain insider status. Therefore it can be difficult not only to obtain outside help based on distance, but it can also go against cultural expectations to do so.

Confidentiality is a vital ingredient to effective therapy. As delineated in the American Psychological Association's Ethics Code, confidentiality is held in the highest regard (APA, 2010). One major challenge that rural people face is that confidentiality is violated implicitly and unintentionally (Endacott et al., 2006; Gillespie & Redivo, 2012; Gonyea et al., 2014; Helbok, Marinelli & Walls, 2006; Schank & Skovholt, 1997). Community members know through the "grapevine", "gossip," or simply via observation who is engaged in therapy. Coupled with a need to conform to a rural norm and to be seen as "self-sufficient" (Gonyea et al., 2014), needing psychological services can be a source of shame and guilt.

**Strengths of rural communities.** Although the insular nature of rural towns can be a drawback to seeking effective therapy, it can also be a benefit. Typically when members of the rural communities belong to an in-group, that group can be tapped as a source of support. This not only represents a close-knit social network but is often viewed as "extended family." This may cause members of rural communities to feel that they have a broader social network from which to draw support, and this network may act as a protective factor at times of stress (Endacott et al., 2006; Gonyea et al., 2014; Helbok et al., 2006).

### **Rural Servicemen and Veterans**

Rural veterans make up roughly one third of the total veteran population (Baker et al., 2015). Yet the research that outlines their cultural barriers and strengths is still lagging behind. As previously stated, there is research that recognizes their logistical problems receiving consistent quality access to their VA benefits (Buzza et al., 2011; Jameson & Blank, 2007). Although the distance to mental and physical care is a legitimate concern, there is a much richer and deeper explanation as to why rural couples may not seek mental health and physical health services. It is often rooted in the rural community's culture (Fischer et al., 2016)

The previous section discussed the cultural issues that exist in a small town. In addition, rural vets also seem to experience higher rates of certain issues common to veterans even on top of the transitional and cultural issues. Research indicates that rural residents have higher rates of depression, PTSD, substance abuse, domestic violence and suicide than their urban counterparts (Baker et al., 2015; Smalley, Yancey, Warren, Naufel, Ryan, & Pugh, 2010). Coupled with the already higher rates of these behavioral health problems among veterans, rural servicemen experience an added disadvantage. One study suggested that residence in rural areas was an independent risk factor for suicide in and of itself. The authors suggested that this may be due to lack of access to mental health services, access to firearms, and attitudes toward mental health treatment (Lu, Woodside, Chisholm, & Ward, 2014). Similarly, McCarthy et al. (2012) reported that suicide among rural veterans is significantly higher than their urban and suburban counterparts. In addition, rural veterans also report lower levels of health-related quality of life than their urban and suburban counterparts (Weeks et al., 2004). This compounds the challenges rural veterans may face on re-entry to their communities. However, a thorough review of the literature revealed no study that specifically spoke to this population and their unique struggles after deployment, and in particular the problems faced by rural families.

Therefore, rural veterans must navigate not only the pitfalls and issues of reintegration that all other veterans face, but they also have to map the issues inherent in rural life on top of this. This may create a very high risk and critical scenario that is not yet adequately addressed in existing research.

### **Military Couples in a Small Town**

A thorough review of the literature revealed no studies that specifically focused on the rural veteran population and their unique struggles after deployment, and only one study (Lapp et

al., 2010) was with a rural sample. Though the study by Lapp et al. was conducted among rural military spouses in Wisconsin, the authors did not report it specifically from the context of a rural population. The study focused on “Guard and Reserve” spouses. It should be noted that this study was conducted to discover the reported struggles of deployment on the non-deployed spouse and so several of the participants’ spouses were deployed at the time of data collection. Five main reported stressors emerged from the military spouses that participated in this study. First, spouses worried about their deployed spouse’s safety and also worried about their marital relationship upon their return. Second, spouses felt like they were always waiting for phone calls or news from the soldier’s deployment. Third, spouses felt as though they were “going it alone”. Once shared duties could no longer be shared and this would cause anxiety and distress. Fourth, spouses were “pulling double duty” with parenting duties. Often they reported feeling like single parents without the possibility of a break from these responsibilities. Fifth, spouses reported feeling very alone, sometimes bordering on abandonment. They reported that this was also without reprieve because there was no real way to rectify it over the course of the deployment (Lapp, et al. 2010). Considering the studied population mimics the proposed population for the current study, it would be reasonable to assume that some of these same stressors may emerge.

### **Summary**

This chapter outlines a vast amount of research that exists that deals with the realities of individual and couple reintegration/transition post deployment, challenges of working within a rural population, and challenges working with rural couples in general. The review of the literature also highlights the lack of research that integrates all of these. This chapter also delineated the mental health and relational problems that rural military service men and women experience along with the unique challenges they face within the rural context. The gap in the

literature addressing these significant challenges underscores the need for research on the experiences of rural veterans and their families. The following chapter will address how the current exploratory study was conducted and the theoretical underpinnings that guided it.

### Chapter III: Methods and Procedures

#### Method

The goal of this study was to examine the experience of military couples in rural settings, who have adjusted or were adjusting to the return of the male partner from a combat deployment. To date, there is a dearth of research with this particular population. Therefore, in order to delve into the realities of their experience, exploratory, qualitative research was most appropriate. A phenomenological (Moustakas, 1994) design was utilized to obtain a better understanding of the lived experiences of these military couples. It was anticipated that risk and protective factors would emerge, as well as the barriers (or lack thereof) for utilizing supports that would facilitate their post-deployment transition. This study sought to inform further research for this population. Moustakas (1994) asserted that the goal of qualitative research was not to produce generalizations but instead a deeper understanding of a particular phenomena. Qualitative research provides specific knowledge and personal stories that can add a rich groundwork for future research. Furthermore, a qualitative research can yield rich descriptions and personal stories that cannot be extracted from objective measures (Moustakas, 1994), and it adds a dimension of detail that is also not possible to glean from a quantitative study.

**Phenomenological research.** Gehart, Ratliff and Lyle (2001) reviewed the qualitative approaches that had been used over the course of several years among Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT) researchers. They determined that the most widely used approach was postpositivist, which seeks to understand reality “as it really is” and not influenced by human perception. Postpositivist research still seeks to understand that an objective reality exists but that one must also “carefully account for human bias and sensory limitations when trying to understand it” (Gehart, Ratliff & Lyle, 2001, p. 263). Of the postpositivist approaches,

phenomenology seems to be the preferred method by which to study reality through the lens of individual perception, bias and sensation (Gehart, Ratliff & Lyle, 2001). This is probably due to the fact that phenomenological research strives less for explanation and more for a rich description of experience (Gehart et al., 2001).

Much of the prevailing theory of phenomenological research is based on the writings of Moustakas (1994) and van Kaam (1966). The age of the text has not diminished the theory's efficacy to accomplish the task of really exploring the experience of the participants when this method is applied. Van Kaam (1966) first operationalized the term "phenomenology" when studying what it was like for college and high school students to really feel understood. His emphasis was on obtaining descriptions of feelings and truly attempting to understand their subjective experience of those feelings and the events that surrounded them. From his analysis he stated that the experience of feeling really understood was a perceptual-emotional "gestalt" where both parties seem to co-experience what happened to the subject relating their experience (van Kaam, 1966).

Neither Van Kaam nor Moustakas suggested that phenomenological research was to take the place of quantitative study. Instead, they explained that it is an alternative method that has the potential to transcend other types of research, especially in the context of its scope and goals and to often act as complementary precursor to other empirical and quantitative methods. Van Kaam (1966) stated

The critical method of observation implies the use of the phenomenological method. This method led, ideally, to the type of description and classification of phenomena which can be affirmed by experts in the same field of psychology. Research performed in this way is pre-empirical, pre-experimental, and pre-statistical; it is experiential and qualitative. It sets the stage for more accurate empirical investigations by lessening the risk of premature selection of methods and categories, it is object-centered rather than method-centered. Such preliminary exploration does not supplant but complements traditional methods of research... (p.295)



He suggested that this type of exploration lays the groundwork for other methods of study and can focus the work moving forward. The underlying phenomena and structures are discovered with this type of research. This can lead to a more pointed and focused form of qualitative research for future consideration. As noted above, this is one of the major reasons that this approach was chosen for the population to be studied.

**Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Underpinnings.** The following section will provide a brief overview of phenomenology, its origins, and how it will be used to seek to understand the lived experience of veterans and their spouses.

Although formalized by other authors, phenomenology is based on the writing of philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Husserl first pioneered the idea of scientifically understanding someone based on his or her lived experience. Broadly defined, phenomenology refers to “knowledge as it appears to consciousness” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). In qualitative practice it becomes the scientific way to describe what one perceives in her or his immediate awareness and experience. The word phenomena itself means to “bring to light” (Moustakas, 1994). Thus the practice of phenomenology is to bring to light the knowledge that appears in the consciousness of the individual subjects. This task is accomplished by focusing on the lived experience of the subjects as they navigate the events that shape their lives. The current study focused on the context of rural life as the subjects navigate their circumstances post military deployment. Essentially, this process explored the phenomenon of being from a rural community while continuing to navigate the issues and benefits that stem from military deployment.

At its core, phenomenology operates under the premise of three core processes: epoche, transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation. Epoche is a Greek word that means to refrain from judgment. In this context it means to attempt to approach the topic

naively and to withhold objective interpretation. Essentially, this is to let the experience of the participants speak for itself without coming into the experience or leaving the experience with judgment about what was revealed through the interview process. Moustakas (1994) describes this as the “necessary first step” (p. 34).

The transcendental-phenomenological reduction refers to the process of moving beyond the traditional interpretation into a mindset where everything is perceived freshly. Therefore, the events and experiences are allowed to stand alone, and it is recognized that they are, in fact, singular experiences and should be viewed as such (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, the core process of imaginative variation refers to bringing back the structure of the reported experience. This means to provide a structural description of the experience and the conditions that precipitated it (Moustakas, 1994).

While these three core processes are somewhat theoretical, they are meant to act as a guide for how the information is to be derived and then synthesized into a more coherent theme. They place a base from which to operate when gathering and then attempting to explain the phenomena from the point of view of the subjects. The subjects in this study provided a rich description of their experience and these core processes helped to first understand and then interpret their perceptions. Because qualitative research is subjective, the researcher took steps to insure quality, including self-awareness and credibility measures, as described below.

**Researcher Self-Awareness.** Researchers who undertake a phenomenological approach must first approach the research at the epoche level. One of the most important elements of the research is that the researcher themselves maintain perspective (Gerhart et al., 2001). This means that the researcher must understand their own perspectives and biases about their approach to the research. Byrne (2001) suggested that one way to ensure perspective was to “bracket” one’s own

experience. For the researcher this means to attempt to understand one's own experience and bias in order to increase awareness, this functions to maintain perspective and minimize impact on the research (Gerhart et al., 2001). Gale (1993) further states that this is important because for qualitative researchers to state their own premises. This guides all aspects of the research project, including methodology, data collection and analysis. It is impossible for any researcher to be totally free of bias. Therefore it is paramount that as the researcher for the current study, I have made a personal statement about bias and perspective and reasons for pursuing this project with this methodology. For the researcher, this statement provides clarity and direction that helps guide both the questions and analysis. For the participants, the statement provides a clearer sense of the purpose of the research and the researcher's commitment to honoring their lived experience. Finally, for the consumer of the research, the statement clarifies the researcher's motives and biases and can therefore have confidence that the researcher has been diligent in understanding and minimizing bias to maintain the integrity of the research.

**Autobiographical/Epoche Statement.** Phenomenological research regards the researcher as an instrument who collects and interprets the data about a phenomenon from a particular perspective or lens (Moustakas, 1994). This lens informs the participants and the reader of the researcher's unique perspective considering that each researcher will have a unique perspective. Therefore, it becomes crucial to the credibility of the study that I disclose my own perspectives and biases in order to attempt to provide the participants and readers the lens by which the data is being collected and analyzed.

My name is Jeffrey M. Goulding, MA. I am currently completing my dissertation as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in Counseling Psychology from the Department of

Professional Psychology and Marriage and Family Therapy at Seton Hall University in South Orange, NJ. I am married and have three children; one girl (age 8) and two boys (ages 6 and 2).

I was born and raised in a very rural town in Southern Utah. The name of the town is Orderville and its population has hovered around 600 for most of my life. I feel as though I am somewhat of an anomaly among the residents of Orderville, as almost none of my friends, family or acquaintances who grow up there have gone on to pursue graduate education. I do not know of anyone who has graduated from my high school that has gone on to get a Ph.D., and in a town that small it is perfectly reasonable that I would know if someone had, even generations back. Like most of contemporary society, bachelor's degrees and even master's degrees are becoming more common in this small community. However, I am still the only person that I know of who has graduated from my high school and pursued any doctoral level degree.

In the midst of my pursuit of this degree, I have often wondered why I chose to, given my background. Many of my extended family and friends that still live in Orderville often question me about my decision. Some act as if they cannot even comprehend it. However, I have come to understand that this is part of the culture that exists there. Some can't see a need for anything outside of it and are therefore confused about why someone would subject himself or herself to the demands and sacrifices associated with completing a graduate degree. It has caused me to reflect about the culture of the place that I come from and why people might react this way. It has made me curious about the rural culture and why the people within behave the way they do. It has also caused me to reflect about my own biases and perspectives that are also a result of this upbringing and how they manifest themselves in my life. I think overall that I appreciate this upbringing as I think it has taught me hard work and self-reliance among other things. It has also

imbued me with a sense of community and loyalty that I think I try to emulate even when I am in broader contexts.

I feel that one of the hallmarks of rural life is patriotism. People from small towns seem to love this country and are very supportive of the efforts to keep it safe. From my experience, patriotism and respect for the military are ingrained in the rural white culture. I think this is because rural life lends itself to a more simplistic and one-dimensional way of viewing the world. In my rural white community I was taught from a young age that this country was free and that anyone who wanted to succeed could have success from hard work and dedication. Outside of the national media, there are few voices within the community that would voice disagreement. As I have matured and progressed in my education I understand that it is not as simple as “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps” and there are many other contextual, cultural and societal factors that affect this narrative; but the rural communities continue to pass this message on. Therefore, as this is the understood paradigm by which rural communities understand their country, there seems to be an attitude of gratitude of appreciation for those that would selflessly attempt to uphold these freedoms. This affects the way I view my research in that I am not only looking for the deficits that may exist in the veteran’s ability to get care but I am wondering about the strengths that membership in these types of communities can bring.

A major piece of my upbringing and culture is religion. I was born and raised as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, also known as the Mormon or LDS Church. As a 19-year-old boy I volunteered to serve a two-year full-time service mission for the church and was selected to serve in New York City. So from Orderville, UT, I moved to midtown Manhattan. Culture shock only begins to uncover it. However, it was here that I feel I learned to think of myself in a broader context and learned understanding and respect for others

that were different from me. I also began to see the culture of my little hometown and the things that both limited my understanding but also helped me cope with change. Religion is one the perspectives through which I see the world and I believe gives me a perspective that people are inherently good and want to live happy lives. This is also a catalyst for this research as religion has played a major role in my life. I believe that one reason my rural town has reverence for this country and for the military is based in both the history of the country and the history of my religion in particular. Mormon history is well known to those inside the faith but may be new to those outside of it. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints actually has its roots in upstate New York. The average non-Mormon may not know that the road to its headquarters in Utah was paved with hardship and persecution. Early church members were driven from their homes by angry mobs on multiple occasions due to harsh and unrelenting religious persecution. This culminated in Illinois when the Church's founding leader was violently martyred and the Church members decided to move far enough west that they felt they would be able to live their religion in relative peace. I was raised in a culture that understood and taught this history but it was presented through a specific paradigm. In my community and in my faith we were taught that religious freedom is of utmost importance. The narrative about our country being founded by pilgrims that sought refuge from religious oppression is alive and well in my small town. Therefore, the military men and women that would sacrifice their time and their lives to preserve this freedom for everyone in this country are worthy of our praise, admiration and respect.

Another aspect of my religious culture is marriage and family. Mormon Doctrine posits that familial relationships do not end at death but are eternal in nature. When a Mormon couple marries it is with a belief that they will literally be together forever, not just until their mortal life is over. This belief heavily influences the perspective that Mormons carry into their marital

relationships. Because of this belief and other cultural expectations, Mormons tend to marry at a relatively young age. My wife and I were married when we were both 22 years old. There is a tendency within my marriage, and it seems to be the same in the broader Mormon culture, that problems and challenges are to be put in an eternal context and the marriage is meant to last in spite of relationship conflicts. When considering the geographic area in which I would be collecting my data, I understood that it was likely that I would run into couples that shared my religious beliefs and also had similar feelings about their marital relationships. There tends to be some measure of pressure on Mormon couples to “make it work.” However, in my experience, there is also a very favorable view of the institution of marriage and optimism about its ability to succeed. Additionally, it is also believed that your children are also meant to be with you forever and therefore having children is also very positively viewed. In this culture, couples are meant to have children and raise them also to believe in the tenets of Mormonism, especially in the eternal nature of familial relationships. Because my belief dictates that family relationships are meant to last forever, I tend to approach conflict and conflict resolution within the context of the faith. This perspective inevitably informed the way in which I asked questions and followed up with the participant couples as they related their experience.

After receiving my undergraduate degree, while working at the University of Utah as research assistant I first participated in research that focused on military veterans and their transitions post-deployment. It was there that I first became aware of the plethora of potential problems that exist for this population as they return from combat deployment. It is an interest that has stayed with me as I have moved through my graduate study. I have never served in the armed forces myself, but have tremendous respect and admiration for those that do. I feel that through my religious upbringing and from the example of important people in my life, I have

gained a sacred respect for the theme of sacrifice. Even in my choices of media, I find that the most impactful narratives for me revolve around this theme. In my mind the average soldier is the one who feels bound by duty to sacrifice for the greater good. I understand that this is may not be true in all cases but I have faith that many members of the military believe that they are a force for good and are willing to sacrifice their time, mental and emotional health, and even their lives to defend the freedoms we enjoy. I have felt that pursuing research that benefits them is my way of showing gratitude for their service and their willingness to sacrifice.

As I have continued to study the transitions that veterans go through post deployment, I became curious about my own friends and family that had served and what the experience of returning to small town might be like given that I understand that the culture can have its own barriers and expectations. In my reading, my curiosity moved toward deployment's impact on the rural soldier and their family. In that reading, I also found that the research that specifically focuses on rural veterans and their families was lacking. I wondered what the post deployment environment was like for rural military couples. I wondered what their specific perspectives might be about their experience and what it means to return from war. Unfortunately, I didn't find anything but saw this as an opportunity to discover what it might be like for them through conducting the current study. Hopefully this acts as a first step toward further research for rural veterans and their families to better navigate the stresses and realities of post-deployment life. My expectation from this study was that the participants will echo the same types of issues that already exist in the research. It was anticipated that they will also cite logistical concerns about their ability to consistently receive care. However, I anticipated that unspoken and undiscovered cultural elements will be discovered through this process. I also anticipated that both some new risk and protective factors will be revealed over the course of the research.



Although in many ways I feel like both an insider (having come from a rural community) and an outsider (pursuing higher education, etc.) I did not explicitly disclose my small town origin unless the participants specifically addressed it. This was noted in memos and field notes as the research unfolded and addressed on a case-by-case basis. Although I sought for the research to be as transparent and acknowledging of bias as possible, I didn't want to offer information that is not salient to the individual couple and their experience of the post-deployment transition and the interview/interviewer.

**Credibility.** Qualitative research tends to have a different focus than traditional quantitative research. Therefore the ways in which qualitative researchers ensure validity are different. There are ways in which the researcher ensured that the research was both done correctly and that it was credible and valid. For this type of research credibility becomes a major factor. The researcher, participants and consumers of the research must have some level of confidence that what is being reported actually captures what the participants convey during the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to credibility within qualitative research as "trustworthiness." This "trustworthiness" is meant to ensure the quality of the research. Essentially to give confidence to the all parties that there is congruence between the participants' view of their experience and the way that the researcher chose to represent their reported experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

One of the most common ways to accomplish credibility in phenomenological research is known as "member checking" (Hernandez, Foley & Beitin, 2011; Rawls, 2014). This validity check was accomplished by allowing the participants to read through the study data to check it for accuracy. Once the interviews were transcribed verbatim, a copy was sent to the participants to read though and check for accuracy. Participants were then allowed to edit or clarify the

transcription in order to ensure that their experience was reflected accurately before the analysis was carried out. Using this method ensured a higher level of congruence between the participant's experience and the researchers representation of that experience, thus improving credibility and validity.

**Dependability.** Another form of "trustworthiness" was also sought in the process of this research. This referred to the extent that the researcher sought to "bracket" his biases from the research experience itself, to minimize and document bias as it happened in real time. The researcher kept a log of field notes and memos that documented the process of conducting the research with each participating couple. This assisted the researcher in making sure that the interviews progressed in a way that ensured the participants' comfort while conducting the research. The researcher would also document impressions and process notes about each interview in these field notes and was therefore able to make needed adjustments as the research progressed. It also enriched the research by helping the researcher reach into other areas that may have been neglected in earlier interviews, thus working toward "saturation."

### **Research Design and Procedure**

Von Eckartsberg (1986) created a simple outline for empirical phenomenological research that takes place in three steps. Step 1: The problem and question formulation. At this step the researcher formulated a focus for the investigation and created questions in a way that was understandable to others. Step 2: The data-generating situation. The researcher started with a descriptive narrative provided by the subjects themselves. Subjects are viewed as co-researchers at this step. Step 3: The data analysis. At this step the data was read and critically analyzed to "reveal their structure, meaning, coherence, and circumstances of their occurrence." This step involved both the structure of meaning and how it is created (Moustakas, 1994 p. 15-16).

This study was exploratory research. It was based on the principles and steps of empirical phenomenology that are discussed below. The goal of this study was to understand the experience of rural servicemen and their spouses. This was accomplished by listening to the narratives of the “co-researchers.” In Moustakas’ work (1994) the participants are often referred to as “co-researchers” because they are given the responsibility to provide all the data for the research. As the researcher I was merely trying to “co-experience” what it was that they have gone through and then synthesize what was presented. Therefore they may interchangeably be referred to as participant and as co-researchers as they were also dedicated to discovering the unique perspectives of their experience. This was broadly carried out in five steps. Step 1: Participants were identified and recruited as described in the participant section. Step 2: Once an agreed upon meeting time and place was established, the participants filled out a brief, self-report demographic questionnaire (see appendices A & B). Step 3: I conducted a semi-structured oral interview guided by questions that focused around the couple’s experiences of transition post-deployment, including their perception of barriers and protective factors of living in a rural area. Step 4: Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed and checked by the participants for accuracy. Step 5: The transcriptions were coded and analyzed for common elements and themes.

The couples were interviewed together. This was based on availability of the participants and the interviewer. No children were interviewed. The questions (see appendix C) attempted to explore the unique experiences of servicemen and their spouses in a rural setting. It was anticipated that the narratives would reveal rich details about their lived experience in this context.

**Participants.** As stated in previous chapters, up to 30% of the total veteran population hail from rural areas (Baker et al., 2015, Veterans Affairs, 2016). The US Department of

Veterans Affairs (VA) runs a number of programs that focus on outreach to a number of populations within their ranks. One of these is a specific program of the VA that focuses on the care of Rural Veterans (Veterans Affairs, 2016). One of the ways that they provide services to the more remote locations around the country is through Vet Centers (<http://www.vetcenter.va.gov>). These centers are in both urban and rural areas and their main goal is to help with transition post-deployment. In the more rural centers they provide outreach to veterans to help secure services and counseling. Using the map detailed in Chapter I, I identified vet centers that serviced an area that met the criteria of being classified as rural. The directors of these programs are listed on the VA website (VA.gov) and their contact information is public record. I reached out to one of these directors and inquired about distributing the list to their population, through email and advertisements posted at the vet center. They were distributed a letter of solicitation (Appendix E) that informed them of the nature of the study, the time commitment, and how to contact me if they would like to participate. This method of recruitment required that the participants volunteer to participate by responding directly to me, thus maintaining their anonymity from the vet center. Once potential candidates volunteered for participation, they were provided with details about what participating in the study would require. They were provided these details via email or mail in the form of an informed consent document (Appendix F). They were able to respond via e-mail or mail to confirm their interest and agree to the informed consent. Participants and I then agreed upon a time and place to meet to conduct the interview via email or phone. The couple was then sent the demographic questionnaire either via e-mail or mail and asked to complete before meeting for the interview. They were asked to either complete it and email or mail it back to me, or to have it finished when I arrived for the interview. Total participation for the couple included one 60-120 minute

encounter to conduct the interview (not including time to fill out the demographic questionnaire) and then a follow up where they checked the transcribed material for accuracy. They were also given the opportunity to receive a copy of the results once the study was completed.

As stated in Chapter I, only couples that have been married or in a committed partnership for at least a year and were together at the time of at least one of the soldiers' deployments were included. Also, only couples that have experienced deployment to a recent conflict and couples in which the soldier experienced some level of combat were recruited. This was to ensure that the sample had experienced both the deployment and the transition together in order to gain a more accurate description of what these events were like as a unit.

This study used purposive sampling to recruit subjects. This refers to a researcher's selection of participants based on a set of specific characteristics or for a specific purpose (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Furthermore, purposive sampling is derived from a non-probability sample that is selected based on the characteristics of a population and the intended objective of the study. This type of sampling is used when the target sampling needs to be obtained quickly and when the proportionality of the sample is not the main concern (Crossman, 2016). This type of sampling is common in phenomenological studies that seek to explore a subject in which there is a lack of prior information. More specifically for this study it was a homogenous purposive sample (Crossman, 2016). For the current study it referred to the specificity of the sample and their shared characteristics, meaning married veterans who fall within the rural criteria. As mentioned in Chapter I, "rural" was classified as any area that falls within the "nonmetro, noncore" criteria set forth by the USDA Economic research service (2016), which is any town of less than 10,000 people whose labor market is not centered on an urban

cluster. This was determined using a map provided by the USDA Economic Research Service (2016).

Qualitative studies traditionally have a lower number of participants because these types of studies involve more intensive interaction with the participants. Qualitative methods are less concerned with pre-determined sample size and more concerned with “saturation” of the data categories. This “saturation” (or “completeness”) requires just enough cases to clearly identify and substantiate the results. Creswell (1998) defines saturation as recruiting participants until no new information regarding the experience of the phenomena is revealed. Because of the intensive and time-consuming nature of this type of research a sample size of 8-12 is recommended (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). The authors go on to recommend a small sample size in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the participants experience while maintaining high levels of care and concern for them. This study recruited 8 couples to achieve the goal of “saturation.” This sample size was consistent with other studies that have used phenomenological methodology (Hernandez, Foley & Beitin, 2011; Rawls, 2014).

**Data Collection.** The principal researcher was responsible for recruiting, obtaining informed consent, data collection, transcription and analysis. Issues of confidentiality, informed consent, dissemination and feedback were discussed verbally with each participant couple prior to the start of formal data collection and each were provided a copy of the signed Informed Consent Form (Appendix F). Maintenance of records/interviews was also discussed. All audio recordings and transcriptions are kept on a password locked USB device and all identifying information was left off of transcriptions. Demographic questionnaires were coded to eliminate specific identifiers. The researcher accomplished this by marking each demographic questionnaire with a specific letter/number code that corresponds with that specific couple. The

number was also associated with the town or region from which the couple hails as well as the order in which the interview took place in the process. Once the interview was transcribed and rechecked by the couple for accuracy, the audio version of the interview was deleted. To further protect anonymity all full names were left out of the transcript record and they were referred to as “soldier” and “spouse” within the transcript.

Upon agreement to participate, signing of informed consent and resolving any concerns or questions about the research, the participants filled out a brief demographic questionnaire that asked generally about race, ethnicity, gender, occupation, branch of the military, deployment history, etc. (see Appendix A & B). They were then engaged in a 60-120 minute semi-structured interview guided by open-ended questions (See Appendix C) that were designed to explore the experience of these veterans and their spouses of rural life and their transitions after being deployed. As stated the interviews were transcribed, checked for accuracy and then analyzed. The following section will briefly describe the analysis.

**Phenomenological data analysis.** Giorgi (1985) asserted that in empirical phenomenological research there are two descriptive levels. Level I consists of the “naïve descriptions” of experience, or the content that is elicited from the research participant. Level I is also closely tied to the concept of Epoche discussed previously. At this level the material speaks for itself and is interpreted without judgment (Moustakas, 1994). Level II is the “process” material. At this level of material the researcher can describe the structures of experience based on the analysis and interpretation of the participants’ account of their experience (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). It is at this level that the thematic elements start to take shape and the participant’s experiences are analyzed to discover commonalities. The materials related by the co-researchers during the interviews were first passed through the analytical steps that discovered the “content”

themes. They were then passed through the steps that discover the “process” themes.

Specifically, Moustakas (1994) recommended a modified method of analysis based on Van Kaam’s method in seven steps (p. 120-121):

#### Level I: “Content” Steps

1. *Listing and preliminary grouping.* In this step the interview is transcribed verbatim, leaving nothing out. Treating every statement as equal is important at this step and is known as horizontalization. This process also involves formulating preliminary groups of information. The researcher began to formulate preliminary categories under which the experiences of the participants fell. Memos and field notes were utilized to inform this process early in the data collection.
2. *Reduction and elimination.* This step involved analyzing each statement through two requirements. First, did it contain a moment of the experience that was necessary for understanding said moment or question? Second, was it possible to abstract and label it? If it passed these two tests it was a “horizon of the experience.” Expressions that did not meet these requirements or that were overlapping, repetitive or vague were eliminated or presented in more descriptive terms. What was left over is what is known as the invariant constituents.

Transition Steps: The next two steps move the material from Level I “content” to Level II “process”.

3. *Clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents.* The task at this step was to cluster the invariant constituents that are related into a thematic label. These become the core themes of the experience.



4. *Final Identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application.* In this step I checked the invariant constituents against the completed record of the co-researcher. If they were not expressed explicitly or comparable to other invariant constituents they were deleted.

#### Level II – Process Steps.

5. *Construction of individual textural description of the experience for each co-researcher.*  
In this step, excerpts from the transcripts were explained in a brief narrative form to help understand “what” the military couples experienced, including verbatim examples from the participants that illustrate the invariant constituents.
6. *Construction of individual structural description of the experience for each co-researcher.* This step helped paint a picture of context and pointed to common elements of experience across the participants. In this step, the material was analyzed for structures that help explain “how” the experience occurred, and some of the themes that precipitated it.
7. *Construction of textural-structural description of the experience for each co-researcher.*  
This step combined both the textual and structural descriptions into themes that can generalize the experience of the participants. The final step attempted to bring the “what” and the “how” together to more explicitly understand the experience of each couple and then to compare them to the experiences of the other participant couples.

## **Chapter IV: Data Analysis and Findings**

### **Introduction**

This chapter provides data analysis and findings of this study. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological project was to develop a deeper understanding of rural military couples and their experience of combat deployment and post-deployment as a unit. This research was designed to also elicit from the couple's experience and from the rural perspective what they felt were the challenges of effective post-deployment transition, as well as strengths that may exist for this population. This study was completed by conducting face-to-face interviews with eight married couples who had been married for at least one year, had experienced at least one combat deployment while together as a couple and currently reside in a town with a population of less than 10,000 as defined in previous chapters. The main method of analyzing the interviews was a modified van Kaam method by Moustakas (1994), which centered on the lived experiences of the participants who all have had firsthand knowledge of combat deployment and the transitional period following it.

### **Description of the Sample**

The participants of this study were eight military couples who reside in a rural community. The couples were interviewed as a unit resulting in eight participant couples. Basic demographic information about the participants can be found in Table 1. The aim of this study was to examine the most common subset of the target population. Only heterosexual couples in which the male member was deployed were recruited for this particular study. All couples were required to have been together as a couple for the duration of at least one combat deployment, together as a couple for at least 12 months, and to reside in a town with a population of less than 10,000 whose economy was not based on an urban cluster of more than 50,000. Because the

study was also seeking to understand the contemporary issues of post-deployment, only those servicemen who had served a combat deployment after 1991 were recruited. Overall, there were eight couples (8 male soldiers, 8 female spouses) interviewed together as a unit. The age range of the individual participants was 32-48 (Mean age 37.13). Average population of the couple's residential town was 4,275 (Range 355-7,520). Average distance to a Vet Center was 73 miles (Range: 19-153), and average distance to a VA hospital was 243 miles (Range 46-343). On average the couples had three children; three of the couples (37.50%) had children who were born while the soldier was deployed, and one of the couples had multiple children born while the soldier was deployed. Information on current age of the children or age at deployment was not collected in this study. All of the participants identified as White, Non-Hispanic, and the entire sample also identified their religious affiliation as Mormon or LDS. While unintentional, given the geographic region in which the study was conducted neither of these demographic results is surprising. This is further discussed in the limitations section of the study in Chapter V.

To qualify for this study the soldier/Veteran had to have served at least one combat deployment after 1991. Average number of deployments was two (Range: 1-4), and average number of months deployed was 23 (Range: 13-40). Half of the Soldiers had sustained a physical injury as a result of their service (hearing loss, ruptured disk in back, non-permanent internal injuries, chronic joint pain), but none reported long lasting physical disabilities as a result of their service/deployment. One soldier (12.5% of the participant soldiers) was diagnosed with a mental health disorder (PTSD) as a direct result of his duties while deployed.

In the next section, a brief profile of each participant couple is given. Each profile will include a brief narrative about the background of the couple and their general experience of deployment and transition in their rural community. This will include phenomenological themes

Table 1					
<i>Participant Information (*Frequency refers to number of couples that endorsed the item)</i>					
Category					
<u>Couple Demographics</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Range</u>	<u>Average</u>
Population of residential town				355 - 7520	4275.25
Distance to Vet Center				19 - 150	73.88
Distance to VA Medial Center				55 - 343	243.50
Total # of children	8	25	100.0	2 - 4	3.13
# Couples with children born while on deployment	3		37.5		
# of children born on deployment		4	20.0		
<u>Soldier Demographics</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Range</u>	<u>Average</u>
Age				32 - 48	37.75
Race					
White	8		100.0		
Ethnicity					
Non-Hispanic	8		100.0		
Employed	8		100.0		
Religion					
LDS/Mormon	8		100.0		
Branch					
Army National Guard	6		75.0		
Army	2		25.0		
# of Deployments		16	100.0	1 - 4	2.00
Total # of Months on Deployment		184	100.0	13 - 40	23.00
Service Connected Physical Injuries	4	4	50.0		
Service Connected Mental Health Issues	1	1	12.5		
<u>Spouse Demographics</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Range</u>	<u>Average</u>
Age				32 - 45	36.50
Race					
White	8		100.0		
Ethnicity					
Non-Hispanic	8		100.0		
Employed	6		75.0		
Religion					
LDS/Mormon	8		100.0		

that were expressed by the individual couple when their transcript was analyzed for their individual invariant constituents. These were then compared to the invariant constituents of all the other participant couples to discover over all themes for the entire sample population.

As is common in phenomenological research, the individual profiles will also include the observations and impressions of the primary researcher. This data was obtained by keeping “field notes,” as is integral to this protocol of qualitative research, because this process lends transparency to the work and allows a method to determine the impact of my own experience on the data collection and analysis. This bracketing of experience makes clear the perspective and potential bias of the researcher and therefore increases the credibility of my analysis and findings by very much stepping into the “co-researcher” role spoken of by Moustakas (1994). This also adds meaning and texture to both the interpretation and the results.

### **Participant Couple Profiles and Experience**

The couples will be described and discussed here in this section and in the remainder of the study using the capitalized initial of each of the couple’s coded pseudonyms (e.g., the LIs). When it is necessary, the initials followed by –soldier or –spouse will differentiate the members of the couple (i.e., LI-spouse to denote the female member of the dyad).

**The LI’s Description.** The LIs are a couple that has been together since shortly before LI-Soldier’s second combat deployment to Iraq in 2011. They began dating off and on in high school but were both in other relationships when he joined the Army National Guard. Shortly before he deployed on his second overseas deployment they began dating again and were married two years after he returned home from deployment. The LIs have one child together and they each have a child from a previous relationship, making three children in total. LI-soldier currently works for the VA in his local Vet Center and LI-spouse works at a staffing company as

a manager. LI-soldier is still active in the Army National Guard and could potentially be deployed again. They reside with their 3 children in a community with a population of 6,930.

***My experience/observation with the LIs.*** The LIs were interviewed in a neutral location of their choosing, in the home of an acquaintance, while the acquaintance watched their children. (Individual couple's invariant constituents regarding subthemes can be found in Table 2.) This was my first interview of the study. LI-soldier seemed excited to do the interview and was ready to openly answer any questions that were asked. He took the lead on most questions especially early in the interview because he was eager to answer questions about his early involvement in the military and his earlier deployment. It was several minutes into the interview before we were properly able to integrate LI-spouse. She expressed that she did not mind listening because she was learning things about her husband's deployments that she had not known previously. She stated that it made her kind of anxious after the fact to hear some of his experiences knowing that because he is still active in the Army National Guard he could be deployed again. He reassured her that he was not likely to be deployed in the immediate future.

The LIs both interacted comfortably with me as I asked them questions about their experience of deployment and transition. They seemed to readily identify both positives and negatives about their experience in the context of their rural community. LI-spouse seemed to feel that she did not have as much to contribute, as she was not with him during his longer and more stressful deployment. Even though both deployments involved combat, it seemed that both felt the first held more of a threat of harm. She also stated that they did not have a child together until after this deployment, so she did not feel that she could adequately speak to the feelings of "going it alone," as she may be able to if he was deployed again. This was due to the fact that the father of her child was present to lend support while LI-soldier was deployed.

Because they were the first interview, they provided suggestions for future interviews. Three of the suggested questions that they identified were integrated into subsequent interviews. The first was whether faith had a role in any of the stages of deployment and post-deployment. The second was to inquire about specific types of support that the spouse may have received while the soldier was deployed. Third, they suggested that I include explicit questions about the impact that deployment had on the children. In covering these suggested areas with them, they spoke of how their faith helped them cope with the stresses of both deployment and post deployment. LI-spouse also spoke about how her religious community added a level of support that really aided in comforting her and helping her cope while he was away. The LIs don't feel that deployment affected their children in a significant way at the time but were very mindful of what may happen if he were deployed again now that they are older. These all proved to be very valuable additions to the study, and I was grateful for their input into the study.

**The YO's Description.** YO-soldier joined the Army National Guard shortly after high school because his family had a rich tradition of military service and he wanted help paying for school. The YOs had been married for several years and had one child when he was deployed to his only combat mission to Iraq in 2007. They elected to be interviewed in their home. Their second child was only a few weeks old when he left for deployment. YO-Soldier was not able to go on a previously assigned deployment because of an issue with his neck. He had been in a car accident, immediately prior to his unit being deployed the first time, and was unsure if he would ever be able to deploy. At the end of his contract with the Army National Guard he was given another opportunity to deploy, and after being cleared medically he served a 13-month deployment to Iraq. YO-soldier is no longer in the National Guard and works as a schoolteacher

and real estate developer. YO-spouse is homemaker and a pre-school teacher. They live with their 4 children in a rural community of 596 people.

***My experience/observation with the YOs.*** The YOs chose to be interviewed in their home while their 4 kids played and watched television in the other room. This was my first interview with a couple that had been married with children through the soldier's deployment. There was a difference in how the spouse participated from the beginning compared to the interview where they had not been married but dating during the deployment. Both members of the dyad stated that their openness about their experience had aided in their ability to make the transition from deployment. Both felt it important to be honest about the highs and lows of their experience in order to process it. I was appreciative of their candor and willingness to not only answer the questions but also offer explanations for their thoughts and feelings at the time the events were taking place.

The YOs also offered, what I felt to be, a very balanced and critical view of the strengths and weaknesses of living in a rural community. They were the first to introduce what became the rural "Catch-22" that seemed to develop into a main theme in the rest of the interviews. In my field notes with the YOs, I noted this but wasn't sure what to call it. The following is from my field notes:

The (YOs) have brought up this "push/pull" of being so connected to the community that I have felt from my own experience of rural towns and I'm not sure how it will come out in the research. I expect that it will repeat for other couples that I interview but I guess time will tell.

Basically they were able to identify that the intimate sense of community is what made small towns special. They said that there was an implicit unexpressed support of their family and



their struggles, but that this also brought with it an inability to be private in several aspects of their life, which brings its own set of issues. This theme repeated in most of the subsequent interviews. The YOs also offered an expanded definition of the “Catch-22” in the realm of resources, in that the lack of resources is what made it rural but bringing in more resources would likely make it less rural, effectively depriving the rural setting of its perceived benefits. I found both members of the YOs to be very thoughtful in their description of their experience.

**The LG’s Description.** Like the first couple interviewed, the LGs were dating but not yet married when LG-soldier was deployed to his only combat deployment in 2005-2006. LG-soldier was not shy about his reasons for joining the Army National Guard after being recruited in high school. He needed money for school. He was not particularly interested in the military lifestyle or serving a combat deployment. LG-soldier served a 24-month service mission for his church and upon returning from his mission met and started dating his eventual wife. He met LG-spouse in the 9-month period between his service mission and his deployment. LG-soldier was in denial about serving his deployment and lamented being absent from his home and family for much of his early twenties due to his 24-month service mission for his church and his 18-month combat deployment. After returning home from deployment he married LG-spouse who had been his girlfriend during his deployment, they now live in a community of 4,733 people, in a home with their 4 children. LG-soldier did not renew his contract with the National Guard after his deployment and now works as a CPA. LG-spouse is primarily a homemaker.

***My experience/observation with the LGs.*** The LG dyad elected to be interviewed in their home. LG-soldier’s mother was there and watched their four children while the interview took place. Like the first interview, it took a little time to fully integrate LG-spouse into the interview because they were not married at the time of his deployment. She was still pursuing an

undergraduate degree while he was deployed. LG-soldier was quick to identify that the military was a means to an end for him. He was clear about how disruptive to his life it had been to be deployed in the middle of finishing his undergraduate degree in accounting. He expressed appreciation for what he felt the military and his deployment had taught him but was glad to be out. He was also grateful to the military for financing his education and did not feel that the duties of his deployment were significantly stressful to him. Although he was in several situations in which he witnessed combat while in Iraq, he reported that he had been fortunate that he personally had not been subjected to many of the more intense events experienced by other members of his unit.

LG-soldier was raised in a town that was actually much smaller than the current town that he and his wife live in. LG-soldier was the first to identify what he felt was a major risk factor for youth living in small town. He identified what he felt was a mentality that limited one's ability to take in a broader worldview. He felt that kids from small towns often "settle" for jobs and circumstance that allow them to stay in their hometowns without having a good understanding of what exists outside of it. Other participant couples in various ways expressed this theme, but it was of specific concern to him.

**The FC's Description.** The FCs were the oldest couple interviewed for this study. They had been married for both of FC-soldier's deployments (one of which was non-combat) as well as 23 of his 26-year military career in the Army National Guard. At the time of the interview they had just celebrated his retirement from the National Guard. Two of their four children were born while FC-soldier was deployed. FC-soldier joined the National Guard in the early 90's to help pay for school. He stayed because he felt he was doing his part to keep the country safe and take care of the soldiers that he was around. FC-soldier expressed a strong sense of duty to

country, and he said that the military gave him a sense of purpose. The FCs together expressed tension around his continued enlistment in the military and stated that it had been one of the major points of contention in their marriage. FC-soldier remained in the National Guard so he could maintain a civilian job and he is employed as a Sheriff's deputy on his local police force, and FC-spouse is a schoolteacher. They live in their very rural community of 355 in a home with their four children.

***My experience/observation with the FCs.*** The FCs elected to be interviewed in their home. Their children are now older and were home but have aged out of constant need for caretaking. The interview was conducted in the evening, and although the kids were in and out of the room where the interview was conducted, they were not a disturbance or distraction to the couple. This couple felt like veterans of navigating the military and marriage. They spoke from experience and had a strong presence of adaptability and skill acquisition and perseverance. One of the things that struck me was their willingness to admit past mistakes and how it had impacted their communication and their relationship. They were not shy about admitting where they had gone wrong in their relationship in the context of their experience with the military. This seemed to be one of the reasons that they were able to maintain their relationship through the stress of deployment and the uncertainty that military service can create. While they openly acknowledged conflict about the length of his enlistment in the Army National Guard, each was willing to admit that they had not communicated well their feelings on the matter. FC-soldier was also able to express in explicit terms that he was victim to the "macho man" mentality and maybe could do more to address and process the experiences that he had while deployed. Others expressed this but not as explicitly as FC-soldier.

The other theme that emerged for this couple specifically was that of the perception of difference between their experience in a rural context and that of suburban and urban counterparts. This theme began to emerge in subsequent interviews, but they were the first to openly state that they believed that growing up in a rural town had distinct advantages over urban and suburban places, especially when it came to the military. They listed numerous perceived advantages including work ethic, patriotism and a familiarity with the outdoors and firearms as protective and coping factors to both serving in the military and transitioning from combat deployment. Once they expressed this more explicitly, I was more keenly aware of this attitude and how it was expressed in subsequent interviews, as well as reflecting on if it was directly or indirectly stated in previous interviews.

**The WE's Description.** The WE were the couple that had been through the most deployments as a unit. In fact, at the time that this study is being written WE-soldier was deployed for a 14-month overseas tour of duty. WE-soldier joined the Army shortly after high school to help pay for school and also because his family had a rich tradition of military service. He served three deployments while with the Army, two of which were combat. At the request of his wife he then got out of the Army and worked as a Sheriff's Deputy in their small community. WE-soldier soon became restless and felt that he needed to do more to serve his country and do his part to protect freedom. After patient but persistent explanation of how he felt and what it meant to him, the WEs decided as a couple that he would re-enlist in the Army National Guard. After serving for two years as a guardsman while keeping his deputy job he was assigned to deploy again, an assignment that he is currently on.

The WEs have a very unique story about their meeting and deciding to get married. Like some of the couples that participated in this study, WE-soldier and WE-spouse met only months

before his first combat deployment that would take him away for over a year. They decided not to delay their marriage and were married only a month before his deployment. When he returned home from this deployment they had been married for 14 months and he had been gone for 13 of them. WE-soldier still works as Sheriff's Deputy when he is not deployed, and WE-spouse is a homemaker and a free-lance graphics designer. The WEs have 2 daughters, one of whom was born while WE-soldier was on his third deployment. Their oldest child has been diagnosed with developmental disorders. At the time of the interview, The WEs had recently found out that they were pregnant with a child who will also be born while WE-soldier is deployed. They reside in a house in their community of 5,803 people.

***My experience/observation with the WEs.*** The WEs were interviewed in their home while their children played in the other room. They were not shy about their experience. They were not only open, but expansive. At the outset of the interview each couple was told that it would take approximately 60-90 minutes to complete the interview. The WE's interview was 160 minutes, and they did not seem bothered by this. They answered every question with depth and thoughtfulness reflecting their various experiences of marriage, deployment, transitional issues and community. They were open about their marital troubles and their struggles with faith at times. One poignant thing that WE-soldier brought up was that he felt that the military did a good job of preparing soldiers to engage the enemy and potentially take life but a poor job of preparing them for the death of their fellow soldiers. He also identified the stigma that exists within the military and how it places servicemen and women in a tough position if they admit to mental health struggles.

WE-Spouse was very open about her feelings of solitude and the burden of being primary caretaker to their children while he was away, especially with their oldest daughter's special

needs. She was also very up front about what she felt she had gained from deployment in that she had become a much more confident and capable person as a result of having to “go it alone.” As the interview progressed, their perspective on how their relationship improved in some ways was striking. They listed the ways in which they kept track of their thoughts and feelings in journals and exchanged them with each other in an attempt to better communicate their feelings. As stated, they were open about their communication and relationship struggles as well, but they counted this exercise, as well as their willingness to admit mistakes, as the reason their marriage had survived and would continue to weather being apart.

**The MP’s Description.** This couple was the third and final of the couples that were dating and not married during deployment. They had met several months before MP-soldier’s one and only combat deployment to Iraq. MP-soldier joined the Army National Guard out of high school because several of his friends in his high school class had joined and he was also enticed by the prospect of funding for education. At the time he was also interested in pursuing a career in federal law enforcement and thought that military service would help him in that field. MP-soldier was met with more family resistance than most of the participant soldiers, as his mother lost her first husband in an accident while he was serving in the military.

When MP-soldier met MP-spouse he did not believe he was going to get deployed because he had missed his units deployment several years before due to other circumstances. It was a surprise to him that he would be deploying with another unit and almost ended their relationship because he didn’t want her to have to face the stress of his deployment. They decided to stay together and were married a short time after his return and his discharge from the National Guard. He works as a federal employee while finishing a master’s degree and she is

primarily a stay at home mother. They have three adopted children and live in a house in a town of 1,520 people.

***My experience/observation with the MPs.*** The MPs were interviewed in their home while they attended to their children. This interview was a little chaotic. As stated, they have 3 small children and they were very active during the interview. MP-spouse kept stepping out to take care of various things and would return to answer questions. They seemed perfectly comfortable in the chaos, and as I have three kids of my own, I was able to weather the distractions to get the information. They were both open to the process and gave thought to their answers, but they seemed to lack depth in certain respects. They were okay with giving short answers to a lot of questions, and MP-spouse seemed understandably distracted at times. They were apologetic and seemed willing to participate but had seemed to have some difficulty navigating the chaos. MP-soldier was quick to identify his faith as a major source of his strength both before and after his deployment. They both loved their small town experience and were reluctant to identify areas that could be improved. They felt that because of rural attitudes about the military that their transition was made easier because everyone was so grateful and proud of military service in general.

**The PR's Description.** This was the second couple in which the soldier was still active duty and could potentially still be deployed at some point. At the time of the interview, PR-Soldier was not only enlisted Army National Guard but also worked full time for the Guard as a training officer. The PRs met while they were in college after his first deployment but before his two combat deployments to Iraq. The military is a major part of their relationship together as it has been a major part of their lives together. They had to attempt to plan having their children around deployments. It didn't always work, as one of their three children was born while PR-

soldier was deployed. PR-soldier is the only soldier that I interviewed who had a diagnosed and connected mental health issue. He was diagnosed with PTSD after surviving an IED explosion while on a patrol in Iraq. PR-spouse works in the real estate field, and the couple lives in a home with their 3 girls in a house in their community of 7,520. This was the largest hometown of any of the participant couples in this study.

***My experience/observation with the PRs.*** The PRs were interviewed in their home as their children played in the other room. They seemed to exude a real “team” atmosphere in their relationship. They seemed to be really unified in their experience and willing to discuss both the positives and negatives of their experience. Because of PR-soldier’s struggles with PTSD, he had needed to seek counseling and they felt that he had done a good job of navigating his way through some of his anxiety surrounding it. However, they were also open about how difficult it was for him to get the treatment as the nearest place that offered it was almost 2 hours away from their home. Despite this, they made this sacrifice, and I noted how it felt like a collective problem that they would work on together, and not just something that PR-soldier had to “fix.” As he is still enlisted and plans to work for the National Guard until he can retire, there is still the threat of being deployed again. They feel that if they can avoid it they would like not to have to go through it again. PR-soldier feels that there is nothing left for him to prove and that he has served his country well. They also expressed a great love and appreciation for their community. This came across as very genuine; they seemed to make it feel like it was the only place for them, in spite of some of its shortcomings.

**The SG’s Description.** This last couple was the second oldest couple of the participants. They too were still enlisted in the military and it had very much become part of their family. SG-soldier joined the Army National Guard out of high school because some friends had joined and



he was needed money for school. The SGs met in high school but did not date each other until later. He was only in the National Guard before he got out and they were married during the time that he was out. They had two children and he became a police officer in their local community. Shortly after the events of 9/11 he began to get the “itch” to serve in the military again. After some discussion with SG-spouse he rejoined the Army National Guard and continued to work as a police officer. In 2007 he was deployed to Iraq for 13 months on the first of his two combat deployments. He was deployed again in 2013 for another 13 months. This was at a time when his children were teenagers and this caused some tension with his children, his son in particular. Between deployments he got training to become an officer and now works for the National Guard as a Range officer. SG-spouse works as a librarian at an elementary school and they live with their two children in their rural town of 6,745 people.

***My experience/observation with the SGs.*** The SGs chose to be interviewed in their home. Their children are older and are not in need of caretaking. This couple also seemed to be very experienced at balancing marriage and military life. There seemed to be a bit of a disconnect on how committed they were to the military. SG-soldier stated that he was ready to go again and was actively seeking opportunities to deploy if he could. SG-spouse seemed to be supportive of this because she knew it was very important to him, but she was also very open about the difficulties that she faced while he was away. They both admitted that the deployments had taken their toll on the children, especially their son. SG-soldier admitted that his last deployment had come at a time in his son’s teenage years that was not ideal. Both stated that they felt their son still harbored some resentment about this. SG-spouse seemed keenly aware of how hard it was for her to “go it alone” and seemed reluctant to do it again, but also supportive of her husband who is still very much committed to the military and serving his country. She

seemed to be facing her own Catch-22. Overall they were very open about their experience and their love of their local community and the support it provides.

Table 2											
<i>Identified Themes for individual Couples</i>											
Couple			# of times each invariant constituent/sub theme was expressed by each couple throughout the interview.								
			<i>LI</i>	<i>YO</i>	<i>LG</i>	<i>FC</i>	<i>WE</i>	<i>MP</i>	<i>PR</i>	<i>SG</i>	<i>Total</i>
Deployment	Risk/Barrier	Stress on Spouse/Powerlessness	3	7	3	7	8	2	9	8	47
		Communication/Physical Separation	3	4	2	3	10	2	10	10	44
		Uncertainty	2	2	2	2	4	1	3	2	18
		Anticipating Stress/Change	1	2	1	3	1	1	3	4	16
		Concerns about physical safety	6	7		5	6	4	10	4	42
		Impact on Children	1	1	2	2	5		5	5	21
	Protective/ Coping	Relying on support network/Faith	2	4	2	2	5	2	6	2	25
		Sense of Duty/Patriotism	1	1	1	2	3	2	2	3	15
		Deployment strengthen aspects of the relationship		1		1	3		2	1	8
Post-Deployment	Risk/Barrier	No longer fitting into family/routines	5	6	1	6	7	1	8	5	39
		Assumptions about functioning/returning	1	3	1	3	3	3	2	3	19
		Tension	2	2		2	2		4	3	15
	Protective/ Coping	Learning to adapt/skill acquisition	7	7	7	6	7	2	7	4	47
		Faith/Faith in each other	1	2	1	2		2	2	2	12
		Organizational Support		3	2	2	1	2	4		14
		Willingness to admit mistakes	1	2		4	3		4		14
Rural	Risk/Barrier	Catch-22/Everyone knows your business	2	9	1	7	4	1	4	2	30
		Lack of Resources	2	5	2	2	3	2	1	1	18
		Limited options/opportunities	1	1	6	3	3	2	2		18
		Self-Reliance to a fault/Stigma	1	2		5		1	2	1	12
	Protective/ Coping	Intimate sense of community	5	9	3	8	6	2	10	3	46
		Practical skills and values	6	4	4	1	3	4	3	6	31
		Rural values of patriotism	1	3	1	4	5	4	6	4	28
		Sense of identity/Difference	3	2		3	1	1	3	1	14
		Unstructured/Independent	1	1	1	3	2	4			12

## Analysis

As previously discussed, the modified Van Kaam method described by Moustakas (1994) was used to analyze the participant interviews. The method is comprised of seven steps to reveal the lived experience of these military couples in a rural setting and their transition experience post-deployment. After careful analysis, the experiences of the participant couples fell into six themes. Guided by the research questions, the analyzed responses fell in to three context areas (deployment, post-deployment, rural life/culture) and then into two categories within each context area (concerns/challenges, strengths/resources) creating six main themes. This was coupled with the supporting examples of lived experiences related by the participant couples. These are known in the model as the invariant constituents or sub-themes. Guided by the three research questions these invariant constituents were analyzed and synthesized to create the six main themes. In the following section of this chapter, the verbatim responses from the participant couples are used to aid the reader in gaining a richer understanding of the themes and lived experiences of the eight participant couples. The seven steps of the modified Van Kaam model were performed as follows (Moustakas, 1994, p. 120-121).

### **Step 1: Listing and preliminary grouping and Step 2: Reduction and elimination.**

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, leaving nothing out. It is vital to treat every statement as equal at this stage and is known as horizontalization. I began to formulate preliminary categories under which the experiences of the participants fell. Field notes were utilized to inform this process early in the data collection.

According to Moustakas (1994), the research questions should be followed as guides to the reduction and elimination of irrelevant or vague statements that fail to answer the question(s). This involved analyzing each of the couples' individual statements through two requirements.

First, did it answer one of the research questions? Second, was it possible to abstract and label it? If it passed these two tests it was a “horizon of the experience.” Expressions that did not meet these requirements or that were overlapping; repetitive, or vague were eliminated. What was left over is what is known as the invariant constituents.

**Step 3: Clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents.** The task at this step was to cluster the qualifying statements that are related into a thematic label. These become the core themes of the experience. These themes were examined across all the participant’s statements to identify and evaluate and identify trends and patterns.

**Step 4: Final Identification of the invariant constituents and themes (validation).** I checked the invariant constituents against the completed record of the participant couple. If they were not expressed explicitly or comparable to other invariant constituents they were removed.

**Step 5: Construction of individual textural description.** Excerpts from the transcripts were explained in a brief narrative form to help understand “what” the military couples experienced, including verbatim examples from the participants that illustrate the invariant constituents and themes.

**Step 6: Construction of individual structural description.** This step helped paint a picture of context and pointed to common elements of experience across the participants. In this step, the material was analyzed for structures that help explain “how” the experience occurred, and some of the themes and circumstances that precipitated it.

**Step 7: Construction of textural-structural description.** This step combined both the textual and structural descriptions into themes that can generalize the experience of the participants. The final step attempted to bring the “what” and the “how” together to understand

the lived experience of each participant couple and how they compare to the experiences of the other participant couples.

### **Themes**

After performing the final steps of the modified Van Kaam method, six main themes emerged with several sub-themes for each theme. The research questions through which the interviews were analyzed were the following:

1. How do rural military couples experience deployment and post-deployment transition?
2. What, if any, are the concerns and challenges expressed by this specific population?
3. What, if any, are the strengths and resources expressed within this specific population?

Whether it was a function of the subject matter, the research questions, the interview questions, the sequencing of the interview questions, the researcher, or a combination of all of these, six main themes emerged and intermingled. They also seemed to fall into a chronological order (deployment, post-deployment) and then viewed through the context of their rural perspective. The six themes were identified from the statements and experiences that the couples generated from the three research questions that centered on their experience of deployment and post-deployment transition in a rural setting and navigating these events together as a couple. Theme one centered on concerns and challenges of deployment specifically the stress that came from “I cannot do this by myself” in various contexts for each or them. Theme two centered on the strengths and resources that came from their deployment experience that came to be known as, “we are stronger than we thought.” Theme three had to do with concerns and challenges faced during the post-deployment period and were categorized, as “we didn’t realize it would be so different.” Theme four again shifted to strengths and resources and took on a the theme of “we learned a lot about each other and our relationship.” Theme five brought in the difficulties of

navigating this in a rural context and became “it’s great that everyone knows you so well, until it’s not.” And finally, theme six centered on what helped ease the burdens and transitions of deployment and post deployment in a rural setting under the heading “the level of support in a rural community is unmatched.” Below is a more detailed discussion of each theme.

**Theme one: I cannot do this by myself.** The first theme that emerged was related to the experiences of stress that seemed to come from many places while preparing for and going through deployment as a couple. This was summarized by YO-spouse that when she found out that her husband was in fact going to be deployed stated, “I can’t. I cannot do this by myself for a whole year.”

This first theme was derived from both the soldier and spouse in six invariant constituents (sub themes). [A breakdown of theme and the subsequent invariant constituents can be found in Tables throughout this section. See Table 3 for a breakdown of Theme One.] For the participant couples, these themes revolved around elements of loneliness, powerlessness to affect change or protect the other from harm, and a balancing of unanticipated responsibilities. This is feeling of needing support and doubting their abilities to navigate deployment without their counterpart was a shared experience endorsed by all of the participant couples in some form.

The participant couples all shared similar sentiments about the stresses that accompanied preparing for and enduring the soldier’s deployment. To better define and more comprehensively understand the barriers and risk factors that these rural couples faced, six sub-themes were identified: (1) Stress on spouse/powerlessness, (2) Communication/physical separation, (3) Uncertainty, (4) Anticipating Stress/Change, (5) Concerns about physical safety, and (6) Impact on children. Through these six sub themes, every dyad expressed the stresses of deployment.

Table 3	
<i>Theme one: "I can't do this by myself."</i>	
<u>Invariant Constituents/Sub Themes:</u>	<u>Number of couples that raised this concern</u>
Stress on Spouse/Powerlessness	8
Communication/Physical separation	8
Uncertainty	8
Anticipating Stress/Change	8
Concerns about physical safety	7
Impact on Children	7

The overall theme of “going it alone” was expressed explicitly by SG-spouse when asked what the most stressful parts of her experience had been while he was deployed:

The kids and then running the house and just being a single parent; that was the hardest part. Though our daughter, when he first left, was probably the easiest. But the longer he was gone, she started to become probably the hardest as far as missing her dad. She's kind of acting out a little bit in school. Our son, I think, just kind of felt like he had to take responsibility because he's the man of the house, so he seemed to handle it okay. He still would get kind of teary every once in a while but ... Just kind of knowing how to deal with the kids when they had problems, at what to say, how to handle it. Just dealing with the house when things would go... Like the furnace went out and so we didn't have any heat.

SG-spouse expressed how tough it was to navigate “single-parenthood” and having to deal with both the emotional and practical impact of deployment on their family.

The soldier's sense of stress while deployed took two forms. MP-soldier reported experiencing mood changes as a result of being away from friends and family:

I would say I got ... while I was out there, I would say that I probably experienced some form of, I guess, you would say depression...So, I was pretty down at the time. I

wondered is it because I'm here that I'm feeling this? You know what I mean? Is it going to get better when I get home? Is it going to improve? That was always a big question on me. I just was excited to get back into the real world, real life, progression, everything.

PR-soldier expressed a more common form of the stress that the participant soldiers expressed:

At (the base where we were stationed) we were getting mortared daily and sometimes multiple times a day. And you had no idea when they were coming, or when or where they were going to hit. You just heard sirens. Sometimes the sirens came after impacted. And there's nothing you can do. Some people say run to a bunker, run and take cover and whatnot. I mean, you don't know where to run. You might run right into it. Some men would be on the toilet and there's nothing you can do. You're at the mercy of whatever happens. We learned really quick to identify what kind of things would cause us harm. Even if they did blow up, you had to make these decisions at a rapid fire pace. We're driving our trucks down the highway at 75, just penned and as quick as you see this, you're making judgments about them. And not just for your vehicle, but for seven others that are with you. One guy has to let everybody know he's locking them up or get up on something and make the decision to stop or just blast past it. And get the guys behind you to stop before they hit it. Its adrenal fatigue from always being amped up and always at such a high rate... You go from zero to 100 in nothing flat and then as soon as you're done shooting, you just wind back down. You reload the guns, so it's ready to go for the next mission. It was real volatile and running into red all the time. This one we were like red line and a drop, red line and a drop.



Unanticipated mood changes and combat/duty stress were often sources of difficulty for the soldiers while they were deployed, not to mention the toll that this had on their spouse at home, described here by PR-spouse:

The second deployment was really hard when I knew he was in really physical danger a lot. That was stressful and then I also had two really young kids that I was all by myself with. I was worried that (our second daughter) wouldn't ever know (PR-soldier). I was worried that my girls wouldn't remember him if something happened. And I was worried they wouldn't remember him when he got home. It was this constant thing of showing them pictures and talking about Ryan and trying to make him a part of our daily life for their sake, so that we could have a family when he got home. Trying to make sure they had a relationship with him somehow.

YO-spouse offered a similar sentiment about the stress of physical danger:

You never think about your husband having to go to war, so you just kind of just go along. But then once they do get deployed, you ... When they're gone, and he's like "I had to write to letter to you if I didn't make it." And they tell you that and you're just like, "Whoa!" It's like, "Yeah, all of a sudden I had to write a letter to our wives." It's like, "Ah! We don't like that." But, yeah, while they're gone you realize how much they mean and how much they can just totally be gone in an instant...It's so stressful not knowing what was going on all the time, and he would try to keep things pretty normal for me, when I knew that it wasn't. But it was stressful trying to take care of my kids, and pay the bills, and mow the lawn, and make sure my tires had air in them, and just like all the things that I had to keep track of at home. And I think I even had to sell a car during his deployment. It's just like non-stop. And it's not like we can call him up and be like, "Hey,

what's the number to our license?" You know, it's like okay, I have to email him 'cause he's asleep right now and then he'll respond back in the morning. And then, so everything just took like so much longer and it was just so much more stressful to get anything done

Each of these excerpts is full of multiple sub-themes and their potential impact on the lives of the participant couples. In this statement above she hits on the impact on the family, being the primary caretaker, taking care of household needs and all while facing the uncertainty of the soldier's safety.

FC-soldier also expressed a common sub theme when discussing a feeling of powerlessness in communication:

Well, I was over there and I didn't ... I know I think with her, when I would talk to her, and she would sometimes vent and just felt like I was supposed to do something, fix something right there. And I knew she wasn't wanting me to go do it, but she wanted vent, and I think I was distanced to her, like I didn't care. But it wasn't that I didn't care, it was just like, I couldn't do a damn thing about it. I'm halfway around the world, I had other things on my mind, making sure I could stay alive so I could come back and take care of that stuff. I think also part of it was at times we'd be talking and the phone would go dead.

FC reported that this was common and would cause them a lot of frustration and tension in their relationship while he was deployed. Logistical communication issues were part of nearly every participant couples' experience, as well as the disconnect that came with "leading two different lives", which is covered in more detail by theme three.

**Theme two: we are stronger than we thought.** The second main theme that emerged from the analysis focused on the things that made the experience of deployment easier and the

lessons that they learned about themselves and each other in the process. This theme centers around the experiences had and the skills learned that fostered skill acquisition and adaptability in members of the dyad. This was expressed by SG-spouse when she said, “I think I realized that I was stronger than I thought I was, that I *could* do it on my own...”

These invariant constituents were shared by both members of the couple and expressed in various ways in the dyad. These statements centered on sharing a sense of duty and sacrifice that made the deployment worth their stress and struggle. The couples also identified a sense of support from both their religious faith as well as their immediate support network that eased their distress in times of anxiety/worry. Couples were also able to identify elements of the deployment that actually strengthened their relationship because they were forced to communicate in such a different way and only conveying what was most important when they did speak. This seemed to foster a sense of intimacy that they felt couldn’t have been achieved without the physical separation. Most of the participant couples expressed experience that related to at least one of these invariant constituents.

These similar lived experiences among the participant couples led to three sub themes: (1) Support network/Faith, (2) Sense of duty/patriotism, and (3) Deployment strengthened the relationship. See Table 4.

Table 4	
<i>Theme two: "We are stronger than we thought."</i>	
<u>Invariant Constituents/Sub Themes:</u>	<u>Number of couples that raised this concern</u>
Support Network/Faith	8
Sense of Duty/Patriotism	8
Deployment strengthened the relationship	5

Couples seemed to express the skill and flexibility acquisition they had gained from deployment because they were willing to discuss not only the difficulties of deployment but also the willing sacrifices and gains that they made from his service. PR-soldier spoke about the sense of duty he had to his country:

We were willing to go and fight if there's something to fight for...I'm willing to sacrifice time away from my wife and my ... And it was our one daughter at the time. She was six months old when I left. And if there's something big that the nation needs I was willing to go and my wife supported that.

SG-soldier was even more direct about his sense of duty and desire to serve:

I wanted it. I volunteered. I tried to find really any unit that was going and it just happened to be that the (unit number) was going, so I did whatever I had to get on the list. Anyway, it's something that's exciting. It's something I want to do. It's the reason why I got back in.

There was a real sense of pride about military service and what it meant to the country and their community. Both members of the dyad echoed it with their willingness to sacrifice for their country. The PRs went on to explain what their faith meant to them while he was deployed:

PR-spouse: As far as my faith and God in my perspective on a deployment, because I believed that our marriage also included God in with us. There was three of us, instead of two of us. It helped me feel like one third of us was gone, but I still had another partner that was there trying to help us with our marriage. There was somebody else there that was invested on us as a couple staying together this deployment. And I kind of knew that divorce wasn't an option and so many military families go into this and they break up. There's a divorce that happens and I think honestly it's because they don't have that third

person in their marriage. God is the one that kind of holds them together during a military deployment and for me, that was the faith that sometimes kept us together as a couple, because there was no other alternative.

PR-soldier: That same relationship I knew I may not be there to help them, but had a Father in Heaven who was. And I can ask him for the that protection and my prayers were over there more focused on home than on me. Every time. I knew I had tons of prayers coming my way. Everyone at home was praying for us, but I didn't know how many prayers were going out to my family, but mine. I had faith enough to know that my faith would take care of them.

This sentiment was also shared by other couples that counted their faith as an “anchor” to their strength during the long and sometimes difficult months of deployment. Many couples also counted their families and communities as major supports while they were apart. YO-spouse spoke about how important this was to her during her husband’s absence:

I think everyone was willing to help. I don't think I accepted help very well. I didn't want to ... I didn't like going places by myself, or taking me and my kids. I felt like people were like, "Oh, poor (YO-spouse)." So I wouldn't go to a lot of things, like war things, or I'd go to my mom's and let them help me. Like I was like, "Mom. I'm gonna go lay down." And she would just do stuff with my kids, so I'd let her, and I'd let a couple of people I trusted. But I wouldn't let like neighbors really help or, I don't know, I was dumb that way. But I think they would have, if I would have let them or express that I needed help.

The final sub theme in this area was the sense that they were “in this together” and ways in which the participant couple experienced stronger bond as a result of the distance/absence. This was also expressed well by the YO dyad:

YO-soldier: As far as working that out, you had to rely on family and friends to help out as much as you could. And like I said, she did a lot just by herself. So there were never knock-down drag-out fights or quarrels or arguments, or "you should have done this or you should have done that," for the most part. We were in each other's corners. As far as the little that we could do for each other. I think we did as best we could. Like, it was, even though we separated physically. I think emotionally we probably got closer.

YO-spouse: Yeah. 'Cause we tend to like write our feelings out to each other, you know.

YO-soldier: Emotionally, yeah, we were drawn together and realized how much we did miss each other and care for each other. Now that they were gone and we couldn't have that constant nourishment. So emotionally, I think we actually got closer mentally, which is kind of the same.

WE-spouse also spoke about a way that they were able to strengthen their relationship:

I think the biggest difference in our relationship prior to his deployment was that we actually got to have one when he was home. We wrote a lot, a lot of letters. We both wrote journals that when we would finish one we would mail it to the other person, so they could see what the day to day was like. Because obviously we didn't get to do that before he left, really. I mean, we were basically honeymooning for two weeks, and then he left. Our day to day was a lot different than a lot of people's. We journaled a lot, and we still have those, which I think is a good thing that we can give to our kids eventually.

They were able to come up with creative ways to stay connected and counted this as a way that they were actually strengthened while he was deployed.

**Theme three: we didn't realize it would be so different.** This theme expressed the difficulties that the participant couples faced when the soldier returned from deployment and what contributed to their stress around this transitional period. The experiences expressed in this theme spoke to the unexpected differences and the feeling of being ill prepared to integrate back into life as a couple.

This was exemplified by three invariant constituents that centered on assumptions and expectations about post-deployment that did not meet reality and the tension that came with this. Their comments in this area dealt with a lot of experiences of the spouse and soldier no longer fitting into the family or their routines, making assumptions about resuming life without explicitly communicating expectations, and the resulting tension of between soldier, spouse and children. These were also expressed by most of the couples in some form.

The invariant constituents were broken down into three sub themes: (1) No longer fitting into family/routines, (2) Assumptions about functioning/returning, and (3) Tension. See Table 5.

Table 5	
<i>Theme three: "We didn't realize it would be so different."</i>	
<u>Invariant Constituents/Sub Themes:</u>	<u>Number of couples that raise this concern</u>
No longer fitting into family/routines	8
Assumptions about functioning/returning	8
Tension	6

The transition after deployment had its own difficulties to navigate. Some of this was just based on assumptions and naivety about what it would be like upon return. WE-soldier talked about his assumptions:

Well they would tell us at the yellow ribbon events. Before you leave, you have yellow ribbons to help prepare you and your family for the stresses, and everything else. Then when you come home, they do the same thing. They have a bunch of yellow ribbon events where your family comes to those drills and they tell you what to expect. I completely blew them off. I was like, oh no, that's not going to happen to us. Well...it did.

The FC dyad spoke to both some of the assumptions about coming back as well as the difficulties that they faced when he no longer fit in:

FC-soldier: Well, I hadn't been around for a whole year and I knew that they had a regimen and it didn't take very long to figure out that I wasn't part of it. You know and I wanted to do things to try to get back, which I found out pretty quickly that no it's not all about me, it's them trying to get and keep their train of thought and their schedules and stuff that they had, and all of a sudden this guy jumps in the middle of it, I just felt like jump back into life and start where I ended, but no it wasn't.

FC-spouse: Well I knew it would be different because like he said we had a system. But one of the things that, and I was surprised that it bothered me as much as it did, well it was actually when he came home for his dad's funeral, that he and I had driven over to (parents' town) and my mom and dad had kept the kids and then they drove over for the funeral. And so we were all driving back home and we had the kids with us and the kids were doing something that I didn't think was that big of deal, but he just let loose and just chewed them out and I remember turning to him and saying, "You haven't been part of this, so you have no right to be mad at the kids." Because to me they were acting very normal, but he was really short tempered with them. And so I was a little worried that



that would be a problem. That we wouldn't see eye to eye. I knew that him coming home and trying to set time in there and they told us too all this adjustment and all this stuff and so I was worried about that...and I had planned a (family) trip ... to take the kids, and I think we left a week, maybe two weeks after he got home, and they said don't do that because of all the noise and all that stuff, so I was worried that I had planned this great big trip and it would totally wreck everything.

The YOs were also able to speak to the idea of no longer fitting in clearly and concisely:

YO-soldier: Yeah, we lived two separate lives. When you come back together, it's like, "No. I've been doing all this by myself, and she's been doing lots of in on her own.

YO-spouse: It's like, "Okay, well I wanna put my kids to bed and watch my show, but you're here now, so ..." I mean, not to that extent. But he's like, "Well, I'm used to going to the gym, eating chicken and having my food ready for me, and now I can't go 'cause I've got these kids."

YO-soldier: So, while I was gone, like I said emotionally, probably grew together. Felt bad 'cause we couldn't help each other as much as we could physically. But I wouldn't say there were any conflicts or arguments or disagreements until we actually got put back together.

Much like several of the couples, they felt that had reached a place in deployment that felt like they were more together on one level but integrating back together presented its own challenges. The LI dyad adds to this sense of having to rebalance routines even after some of his shorter month long trainings:

LI-spouse: We try to get everything on routine, and stay on routine, and hope that when he comes back he'll jump into it with us. He never does, but ... so then we try to just find

whatever. I think for me, it's more of, I learn how to do everything by myself, and when we're on routine, I do everything by myself. Then he comes back, and I'm like, "Great. More hands. Another person. Here, you do this." Pawn stuff off on him. I don't know that we prepare well. We just kind of, "When he gets home, he gets home."

LI-soldier: The best thing that you say to me is like, "When I know it's just me," you have to do it because there's no one else there to do it.

LI-spouse: When he's there, I can relax. Well, he can get up with the kids today, or he can take them to school. He can cook dinner tonight. You know, it's more of ... yeah. I mentally prepare for it. He's going to be home, I can balance things finally again. I can sleep in tomorrow. I'm exhausted, type of stuff. So yeah, mentally, I get excited. Maybe I can sleep in for a day or two. He comes home always tired. So then that never works out as I had mentally planned for. He wants to sleep and take naps, and I'm like, "You suck to me."

LI-soldier: You know, that's the same way with me. I was like, "I've been gone for training. I want to come home and just relax for a little bit." Like, "I want to take my shoes off finally-" And it's the same thing with her. Like, "I've been doing this by myself. I want to relax and take my shoes off."

LI-spouse: Yeah. Doing it for so long, and there's a lot of stuff that I don't do and can't do at the house. I guess I could, but like, the landscaping. I can't get up and trim the trees, and do all that crap, so I expect as soon as he's home, "You got chores to do. Life is still continuing on now that you're home." I think that's my expectation, and it doesn't happen that way that fast. In many ways, it takes him a week or two to acclimate, to get back on life.

The final sub-theme area identified as the tension that can exist as some of these transitional issues crop up. This was the SG's response when asked about how their kids reacted to deployment:

SG-soldier: They're still irritated at me to this day.

SG-spouse: Our son was pretty upset. There are several pictures of him... Even when (SG-soldier) enlisted the first time, the picture of our son, he's kind of got a long face. I think that was really hard on him because I think he was old enough to understand that this could be a bad thing, dad could get hurt, dad might not come home. But I think our daughter was just young enough. I don't know if she quite grasped the concept of dad was going to be gone because it didn't seem to bother her as much when we were talking about it when you first got ready to leave.

Later in the interview SG-spouse went on to say:

Our son had a really hard time with transitioning back. They fought a lot more once (SG-soldier) got home. I think part of it was that he was used to being the man in charge of the house because he's kind of took care of everything that (SG-soldier) would normally have taken care of because he was gone. So he had a hard time stepping down. (SG-soldier) wasn't used to him always taking charge, so he was trying to just step back into the role of being the dad. There was a lot of conflict there, I think, between him and our son. Then I don't know, it was a little bit harder for me the second time because I think I struggled as far as feeling really alone when he was gone the second time. I think the first time I had just been so overwhelmed with the kids and everything that didn't sink in as much as the second time. So I started to kind of doubt whether he wanted to be at home anymore

or if he enjoyed being deployed more than being home and starting kind of doubt that maybe he doesn't even want to be here with us and maybe we'll end up getting divorced.

SG-spouse was able to speak to a lot of the tension and uncertainty that existed for them upon his return. The tension that existed from expectations and assumptions as well as unanticipated issues was a real concern for many of the couples. However, post deployment also harbored some positives to be discussed in the next theme.

**Theme four: we learned a lot about each other and our relationship.** This fourth theme exemplified the couple's focus on what they gained from their experience of deployment and what made this transition easier.

This theme had a lot of elements and variations, but it became clear that a lot of the invariant constituents did have common themes especially in the area of what was gained from the stressful experiences of deployment and its aftermath. The major areas that were expressed were the learned skills and life experience of deployment and their personal and professional applications. Also expressed in this area are the ways in which the couple was able to reconcile their experience and move forward as a unit and family. All the participant couples expressed what they had gained in some way.

Table 6	
<i>Theme four: "We learned a lot about each other and our relationship."</i>	
<u>Invariant Constituents/Sub Themes:</u>	<u>Number of couples that raised this concern</u>
Learning to adapt/skill acquisition	8
Faith/Faith in each other	7
Organizational Support	6
Willingness to admit mistakes	5

The invariant constituents in this thematic area resulted in four sub-themes: (1) Learning to adapt/Skill acquisition, (2) Faith/Faith in each other, (3) Organizational support

(predominantly in the area of funding for education), and (4) Willingness to admit mistakes. See Table 6.

The theme that seemed to develop was that of experience that was gained from the deployment. Lessons learned from both positive and negatives that occurred while the soldier was deployed. One of the hallmarks for couples in this area was that of being willing to admit mistakes and missteps in the transition. FC-soldier was the first to speak on this sub theme:

All I know is as a service member, is we take a lot of things for granted sometimes that other people do with their spouses, because like I said, I was focused on taking care of the job here, and I forgot about this portion. And so that's just one of those things that, but being a small town, I figured I didn't have to worry about it as much. Because I knew people would be there to help. But it's just one of those things, I was probably selfish like she said, but I was so excited to do my job because I wanted to do it, that I didn't look on the other side of it.

Later in the interview when the FCs were asked what they would change about his service and deployments this was their response:

FC-soldier: I'd be more attentive to her needs. I'm a slow learner in some things, in relationships with her. I think she's happy that I admit that, because I don't think I probably would in the past because I figured it was more her not understanding. It was me that wasn't understanding her. So I think the only thing I'd change is to be more receptive and understanding and listening. The in between, not exact words but, the overtones or undertones of what was being said to me.

FC-spouse: I realized the other day that probably I should have been more patient with it and maybe been more I don't know. Every time I'd try to talk to him about it it'd always end up in a fight so, we could have ...

FC-soldier: Like I said it was our biggest thing, I don't even ... We fought more about the military than we did with finances or religion.

FC-spouse: No, I realized the other day, I probably should have been more willing to maybe meet some of the people that were important to him and asked and maybe I should have listened probably. Because he kept saying, well I wanna be this first sergeant and stuff and I'm like, I don't care you need to just be done, I don't understand why you need this. So pretty much since he's been home from deployment and he did that, I just kind of build a wall around the whole military thing and just that was my way of coping with it and just letting things just hit the wall and bounce back. And that's the way I coped with it. I should have maybe let it down a little bit.

SG-spouse was quoted at the beginning of this theme but I think the full comment is worth noting:

I think I realized that I was stronger than I thought I was, that I could do it on my own, not that I wanted to do it on my own because it definitely taught me that I didn't want to do that. But if something happened, I could survive, I'd be okay because I'd done it that long. I could do it again. You know what I mean? So I definitely felt like I realized my strengths that I didn't realize I had before being alone.

Finding strength that they did not realize they had came up in several of the interviews as well as better preparation for post-deployment transition that came with experience. This is expressed by WE-spouse when asked how she prepared for her husband's return:

I don't think that there's a way to mentally prepare for it when you don't know what to expect. That first deployment was difficult. The second one was easier because I kind of started to tell him, "Look things are way different, we have another baby, we have another kid." Again, I started doing stuff for school because we knew he was going back to school again when he came home the second time to finish up a second degree so that we could get into the job field he wanted to be in. I also reminded him that he didn't know the rules anymore with our family, as far as disciplining our daughter or bedtime routine or those kind of things, because we had a kind of hiccup with that when he had come home between being in (previous area where we were stationed) and before he left where she was getting conflicting messages because he didn't know the way things went anymore because he hadn't been with us. And so I reminded him, I said, "We all need to be gentle with each other when you come home because we don't know the routine with you in it anymore and you don't know the routine with us anymore." I'm not saying everything went smoothly, it doesn't, but just being able to remind each other, "Look, we haven't been together for a while, if something comes up, we need to be able to say what usually happens or what would happen if she acted this way or whatever." And just reminding each other that there's things that neither one of us are going to know about in situations until we're in it.

She was able to more clearly define what she needed as she gained experience dealing with the long separations.

Understandably, almost all the couples commented on the organizational help given to them to fund education. Something that MP-soldier was able to clearly describe as follows:

I walked through school not paying a dime. I'm getting my master's degree without having to pull any of my pocket. There was sometimes where I was able to make extra money because of scholarships and the military funding. Then it came to me. Helped us get through college and have some savings to where we could adopt our children. When that trial and issue came up. Buying a house, all the benefits of that. So there's that aspect that I feel like, looking back now, I'm grateful. They always ask would you do it again if you had a choice and I would. All the benefits that I've experienced, some of the lessons I've learned, I felt like it helped me grow up a lot faster than just basic training in itself and then deployments. Just helped me figure out a few things.

But some were able to speak to personal strengths that came from service in the military.

LG-spouse talked about the benefits that it seemed to lend to her husband:

I would like to think it made him more driven, but he's always been a driven person. You think of people that have been in the military, they're more structured, disciplined...and I think it helped him too.

**Theme five: it's great that everyone knows you so well, until it's not.** The fifth theme focuses on the experience of rural life and culture and how it could potentially hinder successfully navigating with deployment and post-deployment transition. The important theme that was identified here was how rural communities tend to create somewhat of a paradox for the people that live there. The implicit support is valued very highly but it has a tendency to create diffuse boundaries that can create undue stress. This idea came to be known in the analysis as the rural Catch-22, and was the overarching element of this theme. This was expressed concisely by FC-soldier when he said, "Yeah, everybody knows everybody's business which is good, sometimes not so good."



The concerns and challenges in this theme were expressed by invariant constituents that focused on things like everyone knowing the details of your life, a lack of resources to access help and support, limited options and opportunities that may hinder would be supports and pressure to be self-reliant that can result in stigma and feeling vulnerable/exposed. All by one of the couples identified the rural Catch-22 but all noted the notion of diffuse boundaries in rural communities.

These invariant constituents resulted in four sub themes: (1) Catch-22/Everyone knows your business, (2) Lack of resources, (3) Limited options/opportunities, and (4) Self-reliance to a fault/Stigma. See Table 7.

Table 7	
<i>Theme five: "Its great that everyone knows you so well, until it isn't."</i>	
<u>Invariant Constituents/Sub Themes:</u>	<u>Number of couples that raised this concern</u>
Catch-22/Everyone knows your business	8
Lack of Resources	8
Limited options/opportunities	7
Self-Reliance to a fault/Stigma	6

Rural America has its own culture, and there are risk factors and barriers that exist and were described by the participant couples. YO-soldier was able to clearly talk about both aspects of the rural Catch-22 in very descriptive terms when asked what it meant to live in a small town:

Everybody knows your business. I think they're very family oriented. Especially in Utah.

Even in the small town I was at in New York, the community was really close.

Everybody knew each other. Everybody was more than willing to help one another for the most part. So I think you definitely have a much more tight-knit situation than a big city where everybody's kind of a stranger. You do have a lot more close support in trials and things that a family might go through. But, at the same time, even though you have

that support, there's always the other side of things, that everybody does know everything about you and everybody does know if you do something wrong or are struggling with something. So there's also that persona in a small community that you have to pretend to be perfect to a degree. And that can be overwhelming to a lot of people... Just because everybody does know you, unless you cross that spot in like where you just don't care what other people think anymore, then there's that constant pressure to live how you think somebody else wants you to. So there's that pressure in a small community, in my opinion, but for the most part the benefits, in my opinion, outweigh the non-benefits, 'cause there's nothing better than having the support of the whole community and knowing that there's people you can trust to take care of you if something was to happen to you, you know, your family would be in good hands.

YO-soldier does well at describing how the intimate sense of community is both a positive and a negative; how it can swing both ways for most. Later in the interview, the YOs together also spoke about this from the standpoint of access to resources:

YO-soldier: Your resources are very limited. As far as medical care, or healthcare, psychological care. Even groceries. Like you just have limited resources, so another reason you have to learn to rely more on your community and your neighbors.

YO-spouse: Well, I guess you just have to take what it is, 'cause you can't really ... If anything, I'd pick up our town and move it like closer to a bigger city so I have more resources. That's the thing. I just wish that you could go to the dentist or the doctor, or to the shopping for, without having it be a five-hour day thing. So I guess that's what I would say.

YO-soldier: But then you take away from the small town atmosphere if you bring more resources in, and you bring more people in. So it's kind of a two-edged sword. It'd really be nice to have all those resources closer. But we wouldn't change much about the small-town lifestyle.

The WEs echoed this sentiment:

WE-soldier: A lot of the reasons that we live in this town is because we don't want to be around other ... we don't want to live up in Salt Lake around tons and tons of people and traffic and everything else. So, the goods and bads are ... the resources aren't here because the people aren't here, which is why we're here, and...

WE-spouse: And if you had too many resources, you'd have more people and then...

WE-soldier: Yeah, exactly.

FC also spoke to the difficulty and effort that it takes couple with the stubborn self-reliance that seemed to be a theme with the participant couples. When asked if he had taken advantage of care from an organization like the VA, this is how they responded:

FC-soldier: I didn't even ask for it, I just figured probably the macho thing, I can do it myself. You know and I think I had a thing different than a lot of other people did, because I saw a lot of things and deal with a lot of things. Either I internalized it and not let it affect me, or I just said, you know what I can't change it so I can do the best I could and moved on.

FC-spouse: Well I think if you needed those services or anything that would be hard because they're not here.

FC-soldier: Well yeah, I wouldn't have the VA to take care of me and if I did I'd have to travel quite a bit. You know that's one of the things with retiring, the VA stuff, they tell

you first these are the benefits you need to do this. Well if I have to travel two or three hours to go do it, if I don't really need it, I'm not gonna do it. But then also that macho side, I don't need it, I'm not gonna worry about it.

FC-spouse: But you just don't have those services right there and so it takes more of an effort to do it. So, are you going to be willing to, how much effort are you going to put into something. Or if it was easier to do, you might be more willing to take it before it got so bad.

FC-soldier: Yeah, how much are you willing to admit there's something wrong before you-

FC-spouse: Because the effort has to be greater. If we were in a bigger city, a bigger place there'd be more people that were going through what you're going through, where when you're living in a smaller community a lot of times you're the only one.

**Theme six: the level of support in a rural community is unmatched.** Finally, the sixth theme emerged as the couples expressed what made living in a small town easier to face the challenges of deployment and post-deployment transition. The participant couples overwhelmingly identified more protective and coping factors of rural life/culture than risk factors/barriers.

The statements in this thematic area heavily revolved around an intimate and implicit sense of community support during and after deployment. They insisted that rural towns are generally very patriotic and supportive of the military and perceived that this was different than larger more urban areas. They also perceived differences in rural life that made it easier to be part of the military as well as gave them and their children a healthy sense of identity.

The invariant constituents in this theme divided into four subthemes: (1) Intimate sense of community, (2) Practical skills/Values, (3) Rural value of patriotism, (4) Sense of identity/Difference, and (5) Unstructured/Independent. Please see Table 8.

Table 8	
<i>Theme six: "The level of support in a rural community is unmatched."</i>	
<u>Invariant Constituents/Sub Themes:</u>	<u>Number of couples that raised this concern</u>
Intimate sense of community	8
Practical Skills/Values	8
Rural Value of Patriotism	8
Sense of identity/Difference	7
Unstructured/Independent	6

The participant couples were not shy about loving their rural towns and the benefits that they provided. Most were quick to point out that the benefits easily outweighed the drawbacks.

The PR's statement is how this sixth theme got its title:

PR-soldier: The community support here is unmatched. And I don't mean just deployment, but people. People are great. It's easy to be somebody in Richfield, because there's so few of you. People are willing to help each other out and you kind of feel that obligation, because you see each other all the time. It would be easy to walk past someone and not give a hand if you're never going to see that person again in your life. But when you bump into that same person every time you're at the grocery store or post office or wherever, you just have a closeness and a connection where you want to be ... You want to help and you feel like you have some obligation, because you know that person. It's not just a stranger.

PR-spouse: It's safe here. It's a small community. We feel safe here. We don't need to lock our doors all the time. I think (PR-soldier) grew up here, so for him to come up back

to the place where he grew up from, I think, gave him some stability and to be surrounded by people that he's known for decades and for years than ... I don't know. I love it here. It's a great place to live. Great people. The schools are great. Our kids are safe. You can't beat it. It's a patriotic, great, all American town.

SG-soldier, LI-soldier and MP-soldier were also ready to give similar ringing endorsements of small towns:

SG-soldier: I brag about it every time with anybody. Half the people know where it's at, and the other half, unless you don't it'd been down south. I think being from a small town, you understand the importance of America and what it really means to be a servant of your country. Obviously, everybody's here is pretty patriotic and loves the land that where we live and that kind of thing. Just being from a small town, everybody's closer.

LI-soldier: I love it. For me, it means you grew up, you'd go play outside. You didn't come home until it was dark. You experience so much more on your own, like as a kid growing up here, than you would in the city, with all the rules, and all everything else. You have an ownership to your town, I have an ownership of my town, although they're almost touching, you know what I mean? You have that camaraderie of the proudness of your hometown. I absolutely love where we grew up.

MP-soldier: I couldn't have asked for a better childhood. I feel like we had to make our fun because we didn't have movie theaters. So, it was either sports. It was extracurricular activity. It was finding creative ways to have fun and do some probably crazy and questionable things now. It was awesome and it was enjoyable and I learned a lot. I loved my childhood in (my hometown). I feel like a lot of who I am comes from the fact of coming from my small town.

MP-soldier also hit on the theme of the lack of structure being a positive. This is something that was echoed by FC-soldier:

FC-soldier: I like it because where else can you go, you can leave your doors unlocked, your kids can go out and play until midnight, 1:00 and you don't have to worry about them. I can open my back door and I can tell you where my kids are at for the most part. There somewhere in one of these four neighbors houses. And that's what I like about it, because everybody will look after everybody. Especially with my line of work as well, because we look after each other as family as well so.

It was also important for some to point out how coming from a rural town made it easier to transition to the military and therefore transition back. YO-soldier and WE-soldier described it this way:

YO-soldier: I would say there'd be more difficulties coming from a big city to military. Because of the traditional lifestyle, and most of the kids are very structured in their homes. They have a job outside of just going to school. A lot of times they're working on a farm or they're expected to help the family, in some way, monetarily, so they've been taught responsibility and work. And that's the army. It's a huge eye-opener when you get there as far as you go to work, you hit basic training and they're long, hard, responsible days. And, I think a smaller town still teaches those practices pretty effectively. Whereas I, having spent large portions of my time in bigger cities, and watching soldiers that come from bigger cities? I do think they're a little less prepared than me than they could be.

WE-soldier: One thing is some of the guys I served with coming from large cities, they'd never been outdoors before, they'd never been in the woods. I grew up, we had a big

Scouting program, and they've got a Boy Scout camp just in the mountains. Everybody hunts, camping, fishing, hunting, all of that stuff, directly translates to things you use in the military, especially in infantry type stuff. That's extremely helpful but if you're deployed somewhere like Baghdad, Iraq, which is a major city, some of the guys that have grown up in the larger cities, they have an easier time adapting I guess. Like cardinal directions, for instance, I get so turned around in the city, it's not even funny. You get me out in the woods, I can go from point A to point B, and feel 100 percent comfortable in the woods finding where I need to go, how I need to get there, everything else. In the city, ain't got a clue.

As has already been highlighted in the above statements it is important that the participants draw a distinction between what it like in their hometown versus how it would be in a big city. That was not lost on the FCs when asked what it would be like to experience post deployment outside of a rural town:

FC-soldier: You'd be lost. They wouldn't care. I think that being in a larger town or city, it was like so what, nobody cared about you. And being a small town like I said, they're proud of you, they recognize what you did, because they've either had somebody, family, friend, that did the same thing and they appreciate it. Bigger cities, they could really care less.

FC-spouse: Well but also in smaller towns, the good majority of the town knows he was gone, and so when he came home they were, I mean even though they didn't know that he was coming home that day, when they saw him they realized that he had been home.

Speaking of difference, YO-soldier summed it up like this:



YO-soldier: Everybody is there to support you. The whole town. They might not have all been there at the airport when you come home, initially, up north. But the second you got home, the whole town gets together and throws a celebration. Anywhere you went on the street for the next little while, it was, "Welcome home!" and, "So happy to have you back!" So I do think that mentally there was a lot of love. There was a lot of love and support when you did go out when you first got home, because everybody knows you. And that did provide strength, in my opinion. Even though some things I was annoyed by, it did feel good to be recognized so often by people in the community because they knew you. Whereas in a bigger area, you can walk out in New York City, even in (a small city in the area), I would suppose, and not have anybody know that you just got home the day before.

### **Summary**

The purpose of Chapter IV or the data and analysis section of this study was to present a comprehensive exploration of the phenomenological experience of the eight rural military couples as they navigated deployment and post-deployment transition in their rural setting. The main procedure utilized to analyze and explore their experience was a modified version of the Van Kaam method found in Moustakas (1994), which was carried out in the prescribed seven steps. Six main themes and 25 total sub themes were identified. Each of six main themes centered around one of three contexts in which the experience occurred: deployment, post-deployment, and rural life/culture. Each context produced two main themes centering on concerns/challenges or strengths/resources factors for a total of six. The 25 sub themes further defined a specific concerns/challenges or a specific strengths/resources factor having to do with one of the three contexts of the main themes. The interview questions were designed to elicit

responses to answer the three research questions: 1.) How do rural military couples experience deployment and post-deployment transition? 2.) What, if any, are the concerns and challenges raised by this specific population? 3.) What, if any, are the strengths and resources within this specific population? The six main themes and the sub-themes that emerged are as follows:

Theme one was, “I can’t do this by myself” and was further defined in six sub themes: (1) Stress on spouse/powerlessness, (2) Communication/physical separation, (3) Uncertainty, (4) Anticipating Stress/Change, (5) Concerns about physical safety, and (6) Impact on children.

Theme two was, “We are stronger than we thought” and was further described by three sub themes: (1) Support network/Faith, (2) Sense of duty/patriotism, and (3) Deployment strengthened the relationship.

Theme three was, “We didn’t realize it would be so different” and was further defined by three sub themes: (1) No longer fitting into family/routines, (2) Assumptions about functioning/returning, and (3) Tension.

Theme four was, “We learned a lot about each other and our relationship” and was further described by four sub-themes: (1) Learning to adapt/Skill acquisition, (2) Faith/Faith in each other, (3) Organizational support, and (4) Willingness to admit mistakes

Theme five was, “Its great that everyone knows you so well, until it isn’t” and was further defined by four sub themes: (1) Catch-22/Everyone knows your business, (2) Lack of resources, (3) Limited options/opportunities, and (4) Self-reliance to a fault/Stigma.

Theme six was, “The level of support in a rural community is unmatched” and was further defined by five sub themes: (1) Intimate sense of community, (2) Practical skills/Values, (3) Rural value of patriotism, (4) Sense of identity/Difference, and (5) Unstructured/Independent.

Chapter V will present a discussion of the study, its limitations and its significance in fostering understanding of this population and further exploration.

## **Chapter V: Discussion and Exploration of Significance**

### **Introduction**

According to Moustakas (1994), a major focus of qualitative research is on, “...unraveling the elements of experience...” (p. 4). This seems a fitting description of what was attempted in this study and for this population. Qualitative research is meant to go beyond what can be gleaned from objective quantitative methods. It is meant to add texture and complexity to the events that are experienced by the individual participants. This section of the study will discuss the phenomena that emerged as a result of this inquiry into the events and experiences of the participant couples.

Analysis of the individual transcripts revealed rich and detailed descriptions of various events, emotions and perspectives of living in a rural town and serving in the military. These various perspectives gave insight and voice into what it is like for these couples to navigate the difficult and often complex set of issues that arise from deployment and post-deployment in small towns. These interviews yielded themes and elements of their experience that brought several commonalities to the surface. These commonalities could be grouped into six major themes that seemed to resonate with each couple's experience. To better describe what comprised each theme, 24 descriptive sub themes also emerged to lend depth and breadth to the emergent themes.

### **Exploration of Themes**

The research questions acted as guides when formulating the questions to be asked in the semi-structured interviews that would elicit the lived experience of the participant couples. Through this the couples were able to express much about what the transitions from deployment to post deployment was like for them and the role of their rural perspective.

These three research questions acted as filters for the statements elicited by the couples to see if they fit within at least one of the research questions. Through this the six main themes emerged. Each theme fit within one of three contexts, deployment, post-deployment, or their rural setting. Within that context the questions filtered the statements into to categories, concerns and challenges or strengths and resources.

Themes one, three, and five identified the major concerns and challenges of deployment and post deployment. These themes focused on the uncertainty and difficulty that came with navigating the time away from each other as well as the difficulties of “coming back together.” These interacted sometimes inconsistently with the rural aspect of their experience. It encompassed the relationship distress that the couple endured over the course of the lengthy separation. This operated in different but similar capacities for each member of the dyad and it was clear from the interactions between the couples that some of these feelings were still raw. However, it was in this theme that it became clear why interviewing the couple together was the right decision for this study. Some of the couples had never heard their spouse speak of the separation so explicitly from their perspective. Many of the soldiers expressed a “powerlessness” and lamentation that the spouse had to “go it alone.” This theme corresponded to previous finding in the literature. The sense of loneliness that that accompanies the long absence has been expressed elsewhere by the non-deployed spouse (Lapp et al. 2010). In this theme, the contribution of this study was to add to the explicit expression of the mirrored experience of the soldier, as he also felt powerless and lonely in his attempts to connect to his family at home. Other studies have spoke of this feeling (Ackerman et al., 2009), however, this study provided a deeper expression of what the soldier feels when he is unable to affect change at home.

For many of the couples it was also about maintaining a relationship as expressed when discussing the difficulties with communication. Coupled with the expressed loneliness there was also a sense of powerlessness for the couple as a unit in their ability to communicate. Many expressed time difference, duty responsibilities, and technological problems as barriers to healthy communication. This added to the sense of powerlessness for some as they did not have control over these factors and therefore had to find ways to get around the challenges that were inherent in communication while deployed. Within the first theme the rural aspect of the couple's experience was not expressed in any significant way. This theme seemed to follow much of the existing literature's perspective with a richer and more comprehensive explanation of the identified sub-themes.

Theme three expanded on this and captured the challenges that are faced by the couple upon the soldier's return from combat deployment. Much of the research done by Knobloch speaks to the difficulties that are posed by post-deployment transition and the subsequent "relational turbulence" that is experienced by many military couples (Knobloch et al., 2016). This approach suggests that difficulties not only arise from behavioral changes and uncertain roles but from disruption of routines and the subjective interpretation by each member of the couple dyad. For these couples it was expressed by some ignorance of the common challenges that post-deployment transition brought with it. The major difficulties expressed by these couples centered on unanticipated changes and stressors that the couple were not prepared for. This also included the assumptions and naivety that some of the couples experienced.

This theme seemed to have had significant interaction with rural culture for these couples. As discussed, rural people tend to be insular and feel pressure to be self-sufficient (Fischer et al., 2016; Gonyea et al., 2014; Helbok et al., 2006). Therefore, there was some pressure to be seen as

able to navigate post-deployment transition without outside help. The result was tension between spouses and families that some couples stated were still felt in their relationships.

Additionally, rural life likely made post-deployment transition more difficult as some of the expressions reflected the overall lack of privacy that exists in a rural community and that there is nowhere to “hide” your problems. It was described early and often by the participant couples that this was a “Catch-22” as the implicit support from community members was also valuable at times. While there was implicit support of their struggles there was also no way to keep their struggles private. The couples identified gossip and feelings of judgment, the lack of physical resources to help with supporting transition, limited opportunities for themselves and family to access resources and education, and the implicit pressure to be able to “take care of your own,” as factors that made the transition more difficult for them and their family.

Themes two, four and six, detailed the strengths/resources that were used and developed during the soldier’s deployment and return to their rural communities. These reflected the feeling that even though it was difficult, the couple was able to find strength that they didn’t previously know that they had and learned to be adaptable, developing new coping skills that aided in their ability to tolerate the distress. Sanford et al. (2016) define couple resilience as, “...the extent to which couples engage in behaviors that help each partner cope during stressful life events” (p. 1244). While this was hard to accomplish in the midst of deployment many of the couples worked together against their communication difficulties and avoided blame and division at the hands of things they could not control. This added to their resiliency as a couple and their ability to cope with the stressors of deployment. For them it was also about finding a sense of purpose in the sacrifice as a unit. Adapting to the idea that they were serving a greater cause by their separation and struggle. The couples also consistently listed a tradition of faith and reliable

support networks in their rural communities as helping them cope with the stress of deployment. This came in the form of both a reliance on their faith as a source of hope and strength as well as on community members and family to help them cope with stress. They also expressed having faith in one another that they could navigate the transition as a unit as a major coping factor.

The couples also reported that deployment forced them to communicate differently and that this had potential to actually improve the strength of their relationship in unforeseen and unexpected ways. It also provided the opportunity for some instances of “rift and repair” that caused them to find different strategies to resolve conflict that became useful after deployment as well.

One of the most significant findings of this study, the strength and resiliency that came out of being able to admit mistakes. This theme emerged slowly for some and was not explicitly labeled until several interviews in. However, when it was discovered a review of the other transcripts revealed that this was a factor for almost all of the couples. An admission that they each could have done things in service of the relationship at different points of their experience was vital for healthy and successful transition.

The rural perspective permeated both deployment and post-deployment for these couples. Research shows that rural communities are overwhelmingly supportive of the military (Buzza et al., 2011; Fischer et al., 2016; Krier, Stockner, & Lasley, 2011). This was reflected by the expressions of the deeply felt familiarity, implicit support and identification with their various hometowns. Every couple explicitly expressed that they perceived rural communities as patriotic and unparalleled in their support of them and their family. Couples spoke of the hometown as part of who they were and a major factor in shaping their personality as well as their ability to cope with the stressors of separation and reunification. Many soldiers also spoke of the, “peace



of mind” that they experienced with they were deployed knowing that no matter what happened to them the local community would take care of their family. Every couple also explicitly expressed an unwillingness to have been born and raised in another circumstance. Their identification with where there were from felt it ran deep from all of the interactions within the context of this study.

### **Limitations**

Several of the limitations of qualitative research have to do with the methodology itself. Given the lack of research for this specific subset of the veteran population this is the most appropriate approach for the current study. However, researchers who engage in this type of research cannot be free of bias. My status as a person who came from a rural community may lead to bias in the interpretation of the participant’s experience. Therefore the safeguards that exist for this (member checking and epoche statement) are paramount in providing both clarity and credibility to the study.

Credibility and confirmability of the study speaks to the both the reliability and the validity of the study. In quantitative research this is accomplished by the objectivity of the data and its presumption that it is free of bias because of that objectivity. In this study, this was attempted by following the guidelines set forth by Moustakas (1994) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) as closely as possible. Further, to maintain objectivity at both the collection and analysis phase, I attempted to express my neutrality and transparency as a the primary researcher by bracketing my own experience and providing an “epoche” statement clearly outlining the perspectives I had going into the research. I did this by constructing a personal autobiographical statement that can be found in Chapter III of the study. I also kept a journal of “field notes” throughout the course of the study to ensure both saturation and adaptation to include new and

previously neglected areas of focus. This helped to ensure that gaps in the researchers perspective were being closed by the study population themselves. However, the research does not have the inherent objectivity of a quantitative study and this should be accounted for when considering this study and its findings. This speaks to the study as exploratory and a necessary precursor to more objective and quantitative measures for this specific population. Although these precautions and accommodations were made to ensure the credibility of the study, the possibility exists that, I, the primary researcher, in ways that have not been accounted for, could have influenced the participants.

One of the other common practices in quantitative research is the ability to replicate studies thus improving their reliability. This is typically not as possible with qualitative and phenomenological research as it seeks to understand the lived experience of the specific people that participate in the study. This design instead seeks for “saturation” in which new themes and elements become less and less over the course of the research. Therefore it does not lend itself to replication and reliability must be accounted for by considering the research’s influence and impact as well as the context in which the research is done.

This study was based on the experience of rural veterans, and although this may help to inform practice with this population, the findings do not generalize to other veteran populations. It should be noted however that generalizability is not the goal of qualitative research. It is meant to provide an exploratory foundation for further research that may be more generalizable to rural communities. Further, the study was conducted in rural Utah. Rural culture has some similarities across the country but will also have differences that were unique to the location. Because the current study is only seeking one type of couple (male servicemen, female partner) generalizability outside of this specific dyad is limited.

For this specific study, several limitations were also found. First, one specific dyad was sought for this study (male soldier/female spouse) for reasons that were outlined in Chapter III. This aided in adding depth to the understanding of the most common dyad in rural military families. However, this did not adequately address all different types of dyads that may exist in rural communities and therefore may not capture the breadth of experience that may exist if more dyads were explored.

Second, Some of the demographic information is worth noting in the limitations sections as they represent unintentional criteria that should be mentioned. Given the geographic region in which the sampling was done, I was prepared to be able to discuss these two points of data as possible limitations from the outset of the study. The data was collected in a specific region of the country that is dominated by two specific populations. When the demographic data was analyzed it was clear that this study only included members of these two specific populations. They will be discussed in the follow two paragraphs.

First the data point that is worth noting is the racial and ethnic identities of the study population. U.S. Census data compiled by the Housing Assistance Counsel (2012) estimates that rural America is 77.8 % Non-Hispanic, White. Therefore it was likely that all of the participants would identify as Non-Hispanic White. This was the case for this study as all 16 participants identified as this race/ethnicity. A more diverse sample may have gleaned additional themes and experiences, but consequently may have also lent credibility to the commonalities that are experienced among people in rural settings.

The second data point was the identified religion of the sample population. The geographic region also affected this data point and like race/ethnicity. While unintentional, I anticipated this risk prior to conducting the research. Recent census estimates state that the

geographic region in which the research was conducted, nearly 63% of the residents identify as LDS/Mormon (Canham, 2017). In rural areas of the region, the percentages are higher. In some of the more rural counties, this number is as high as 80% (Canham, 2017). Therefore it is understandable that all of the 16 participants in this study identified as LDS/Mormon. The individual participants were not asked about their level of belief or adherence but questions about the impact of their faith was asked (Appendix B). Also Mormonism has its own culture that likely colored some of their experiences no matter their level of adherence to the faith. For example, within Mormonism there tends to be a strong sense of community. Also, in the geographic areas where the faith is predominant, like the area this study was conducted, it fosters a culture of religious adherence (Phillips, 2014). Often even for individuals who aren't members of the faith or strict adherents, they are also influenced by the culture and sense of community it tends to foster (Phillips, 2014). This should also be considered as a limitation of this study and a more diverse population in this regard may have also added texture and richness to the breadth of the experiences explored by the interview questions.

Third, the themes did not always "fit together nicely." The study was meant to look at the experience of military couples as they experienced deployment and post deployment transition through the lens of their rural perspective. Some of the themes (especially theme one) were more susceptible to being interpreted through a very general lens. Some themes and sub-themes seemed to mirror what could be said about any couple's experience of deployment and post-deployment and did not have specific reference to rural perspective or culture. There seemed to be some arbitrary separation between some of the themes and their ability to also be viewed in the rural context.

Fourth, I shared a lot of commonalities with the participant couples. I was born and raised in the same geographic area, I have the same religion, I'm of the same racial background, I'm married with children, etc. This could be viewed as a positive in some ways as it likely garnered some implicit trust because of unspoken understanding of certain concepts, language, geography and cultural commonalities. However, it is likely that I did not follow up on or pursue certain questions or conversation threads simply because I assumed that had a good understanding of "where they were coming from." The implicit assumptions may have also come from the participant couples because we did share similar backgrounds. As the researcher, I did not explicitly address my background but some were able to glean from our interaction that I was from the area and had an understanding of rural and Mormon culture. This likely changed the way that both I and the participant couples interacted with each other. Sharing less in common with the participant couples may have yielded different themes and sub-themes.

Fifth, parental status and the deployments impact on the children were not adequately explored as a variable in this study. The focus of the study was on the couple and their experiences, but parental status and the developmental age of the children also played a significant role that was not adequately addressed by this study. The original questions did not even ask about the impact on children and parental relationships. It was the first participant couple interviewed that suggested questions be targeted toward parental factors. Another aspect of parental role that deserves attention was the age of the children. Parental and couple relationships are going to be affected differently depending on the age of the children at the time of deployment and post-deployment. The age of the children was not collected as demographic information. Future studies within this and other populations that explore family dynamics would

do well to explicitly include information about the children and their developmental level at the time of these experiences.

And finally, the study was also conducted with couples who were together pre and post deployment. This suggests that they had *successfully* navigated the deployment and post-deployment. They may not have been a reliable source to speak to the difficulties that prove to be too much for couples that separate or divorce after deployment. These couples may express more resources and strengths than a sample that represents various levels of commitment after deployment. Including separated and divorced couples may have produced a more rounded discussion when it comes to risk factors and barriers to healthy post-deployment transition.

### **My Experience**

One of the core facets of the phenomenological approach is that the primary researcher is an integral part of the process of the research. This theory and methodology fully recognizes the researcher's inability to be totally free of their own perceptions and biases in formulating the research, collect the data, and analyze the results. Therefore it is imperative that the primary researcher and the participants be seen as co-researchers as they both seek to discover the individual themes and elements that exist in population and experience in question.

My interest in this research was born out of my own experience of growing up in a small town and how that has impacted my identity and outlook as described in my epoche statement in Chapter III of this study. It was important not only for the consumer of the research to understand my perspective, but also for me to be transparent about my motives for undertaking the research myself. This also allowed me to have implicit understanding of the issues raised and provide insight into the themes and findings of the research.

As a co-researcher it then becomes a fine line that must be tread between researcher and participant as the interview questions can evolve as the research progresses. What is noted, what is considered significant, and what is pursued during the interview process is not only shaped by the content presented by the participant couples but by the experience and perceptions of the researcher. I believe that the questions that were asked pulled for authentic and genuine experiences of military couples in rural settings, but it is also naïve to think that my own assumptions and implicit understanding of rural culture did not color what was being presented.

This could be further compounded by the fact that I shared the same religious identification as the all of the participants. With any cultural similarities there is an unspoken and implicit understanding a language that does not need exploration or definition. While I did not know the participants before the research began and there were no explicit disclosures on my part about my personal background it is safe to assume that my lack of questions regarding different facets of rural and religious culture would lead them to believe that I had some understanding of the information they were presenting. Without explicit disclosure I did enough to convey implicit understanding that they may have made assumptions about my personal perspective and background that facilitated their disclosure. My interactions and reactions may have led them to many assumptions that I neglected or was unaware of because I have my own experience of both the rural and religious aspects of their stated experience.

Keeping this in mind, I included both themes and experiences that felt familiar to me as well as those that were novel in my “field notes” journal. I feel that this was key to keep my experience somewhat separate from what the participant couples were sharing. I will say that I resonated with a lot of what was being said about life in a rural town and some of the religious elements that were expressed. However, there were aspects that I recognized but had never had a

good label for until expressed by the participant couples. It also lends confidence to the study that all of them explicitly identified similar if not the same thematic elements that I too have some experience with. The participants themselves further confirmed this sense of confidence, as they were given the opportunity to “check” the transcripts of the interviews. Whatever bias or implicit understanding I may have conveyed they were then able to confirm or reject what was discovered in the record. Many made slight changes to details and experiences but most reported that I had accurately captured their experience based on the questions asked.

While I may have had implicit understanding into some of the rural and religious experiences shared, the one context that was foreign to me was that of military service. I may have an academic understanding of the issues surrounding deployment and post-deployment, I heavily relied on their expertise on what it was like to be a member of the military and come from a rural background. The confidence in the discovered themes is again improved, as the participant couples were able to affirm what was stated in the context of their military service. To see that many had similar experiences that they could clearly speak to suggests that the themes and sub themes were common among this specific population. I now feel better informed and appreciative of both the positives and negatives of rural military service. That being said, it is difficult to convey the total breadth and depth of what I feel was discovered in this research. It is important that this be viewed as an initial foray into this under-explored population.

### **Implications for Future Studies**

One of the major reasons for undertaking this particular subset of the military population was the dearth of literature that existed for them. New research about veterans and their experience continues to be published on a monthly basis. The continued military conflicts ensure that the population of soldiers returning from deployment is not likely to slow anytime soon.



However, even though rural vets make up 30% of the total veteran population (Baker et al., 2015), the research for this population still lags behind that of veterans as a whole. As discussed, rural veterans do face many of the same issues that are faced by the larger veteran population but they also face unique factors that have yet to be adequately researched. Hence, the need for this exploratory study that sought insight into some of the cultural aspects of rural military service. This study should act as a guide to developing more quantitative methods of researching rural veterans to confirm the experiences and themes that emerged from the current study.

Only recently have articles been published that have begun to address that attitudes and cultural barriers that exist for rural veterans as they attempt to utilize services. While this study was being proposed and conducted an article was published that spoke to the attitudinal barriers that rural veterans face. Fischer and colleagues (2016) also conducted a qualitative study that targeted both rural veterans and providers that focused on what kept them from engaging in mental health treatment. They discovered many similar themes that emerged in the current study, namely the stigma that is associated with getting help coupled with the pressure to appear as self-reliant (Fischer et al., 2016). They identified the perception of need and their support network as elements that helped them overcome these barriers also similar to some of the findings in the current study. It should be noted that this study took advantage of a larger and more geographically diverse sample, yet many similar themes were discovered. Both of these studies suggest a need for further exploration and intervention with this specific population to both improve delivery of services and focus on the cultural factors that may be at play.

The need for further exploration into the unique needs and barriers experienced by rural veterans is apparent, yet that was not the primary focus of this research. The primary focus of this research was how the rural couple experiences the transition as a unit. As stated in Chapter II

and III, literature that focuses on the rural military couple as a unit is essentially non-existent. Thus, the importance of the current study is to begin to explore this focus area. This represents one of the first looks into this specific dynamic and therefore can seek to inform the research that may come after it. One of the directions that seemed to be made clear is the need for further research focusing on the cultural implications of the spouse as they are left to navigate without the soldier in their rural contexts.

The article by Lapp et al. (2010) was primarily conducted with rural spouses in Wisconsin but the rural context was not the article's specific focus. It neglected the couple dyad as a unit and focused on the experiences of the non-deployed spouse. They too discovered many similar themes to the current study. Specifically, the spouses also reported a sense of "going it alone," worries about their spouse's safety, and the pressure of being the sole parent. This also speaks to the need of further exploration of the dyad as a unit to confirm that their experience of risk factors/barriers and protective/coping factors match those that were discovered in this study.

### **Clinical Implications**

While the literature described in Chapter II of this study details the various struggles that a couple may reasonably face when confronted with the inherent difficulties of deployment and post-deployment transition, the current study highlighted the areas that require consideration specifically for military couples in rural settings. The results of the study speak to both the risk factors/barriers and the protective/coping factors for rural military couples. While further exploration is needed, the implications of this study speak to some of the common elements that organizations and providers may be aware of to determine factors that place the couple at risk and factors that can aid in their transition if they are struggling.

As Ackerman, DiRamio, and Mitchell (2009) detailed in their research, deployment represents a significant change to the soldier and a major disruption to normal life. He may have experienced things that fundamentally change the way he interacts with the world and with his family. Likewise, the non-deployed spouse experiences his or her own stresses in relation to deployment (Dekel et al., 2005; Lapp et al., 2010). Through this study, it emerged that rural military couples also experienced many of the issues around feelings of stress, anticipation, worry, loneliness, and powerlessness. Their experience in this particular area closely mimicked the literature in this context and may not have revealed unique struggles in the area of deployment stress. However, when it comes to protective factors a major theme that emerged was their sense of duty to their country and that their sacrifice was important. These rural couples were able to make meaning of the difficulties posed by deployment and they were able to rely on their rural communities for both understanding and support. The culture of self-sufficiency (Fischer et al., 2016) also seemed to add to their sense of being able to build resiliency around the hardship posed by deployment. And finally, several of the couples were able to identify areas in which their relationship improved over the course of deployment and exemplified resiliency and adaptability in the face of the stated difficulties with communication. Practitioners and organizations may do well to focus on both the protective and coping factors identified by this population and utilize their sense of self-sufficiency and community supports in order to improve their treatment access and utilization. Fischer et al. (2016) also suggested using similar treatment strategies in their recent study on rural veterans.

In the area of post-deployment, the themes that emerged also echoed some of those that existed in previous research; namely, relational distress (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012) and the soldier no longer fitting into family and relational routines (Balderrama-Durbin et al., 2015).

These couples were also able to identify unanticipated changes and assumptions that made their transition more difficult at times. On the protective and coping side of post-deployment, the rural military couples identified their faith, their community, educational benefits and their willingness to admit their mistakes and errors as ways in which they reconciled and overcame the difficulties of transition. This is useful information to those who would seek to treat them as a couple because they may more effectively challenge the assumptions made by these couples and again turn to the community for support. When engaged in treatment working toward areas in which they could admit missteps and begin to empathize with their partner may ease transitional issues. While this strategy may not be exclusive to this population it was one that they consistently identified in the emergent themes.

One of the major revelations from this research was the explicit labeling of the phenomena that I dubbed the rural “Catch-22.” This described the phenomena that an intimate sense of community that existed in rural communities as both a blessing and curse at times. The Catch-22 speaks to both the implicit support and understanding of rural communities, but the inability to have private struggles and problems out of the public eye. This coupled with the objective lack of resources seemed to be the greatest identified risk factors for this specific population. This is informative because it helps give practitioners and organizations a better understanding of what may be at stake for these couples if they seek services and to develop safeguards and strategies that may mitigate this issue.

The intimate sense of community was also overwhelmingly identified as a positive that gave the couple both implicit support and peace of mind. The sense of community in conjunction with a sense of pride and patriotism seemed to resonate most with these couples in easing their transition. Fischer et al. (2016) offered ways to use the community to inspire both initial

utilization and adherence to treatment. Because of the inherently insular nature of rural communities (Gonyea et al., 2014; Helbok et al., 2006) they report that utilizing veteran peers who have had success in therapy improves both initial use and continued adherence to treatment. This may be employed with this population as well by finding couples who have had success in their utilization of services and helping others in the community seek treatment and support from mental health professionals.

### **Closing Remarks**

Qualitative methods operate on a contrasting set of assumptions and criteria than their quantitative counterparts. While quantitative research for an objective measurement of the questions or phenomena being studied, qualitative methods seek to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience of the population being studied. While less objective in many ways, qualitative data provides a rich and textural element that is hard to achieve in quantitative research. This study was not designed to be an exhaustive review of everything that these couples experience; it was meant to act as a springboard to further exploration and understanding, so that the gaps in how treatment and support is disseminated and utilized among rural military couples may be improved.

Additionally, this study sought to better understand that experience of and often neglected population within the realm of military research. It sought to give voice to couples that have yet to be heard from in the literature. From this voice it was discovered that rural military couples feel a keen sense of conflict about both their experience with the military and their relationship with their community. They identified their world as a place of patriotism, duty and sacrifice while still feeling the helplessness and loneliness that comes with combat deployment. There is a pressure to act with resiliency in the face of hardship that comes from both their

perception of the military and their rural community. Their sense of identity is also wrapped up in their rural community and the identified benefits of intimate community walk a fine line between advantage and stressor. Effective navigation of this dynamic becomes part of the challenge of transition and continued community support and involvement.

Rural military couples are resilient; they wear their self-sufficiency as a badge of pride and identify their communities as part of themselves. They want to others to know that where they come from has made them who they are. Yet, they can also readily identify the paradoxical nature that their communities can present. However, they clearly proclaim that the good outweighs the bad and being in a small town is preferable to the alternative. In short, they would not have it any other way.

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**Appendix A**  
**Rural Military Couples Post Deployment Transition: A Phenomenological Study**  
**Demographic Questionnaire**

**CODE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Demographic Questionnaire (Soldier)**

1. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Race: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Population of Current Residential Town: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Distance to the nearest Vet Center: \_\_\_\_\_
7. Distance to nearest VA: \_\_\_\_\_
8. Please state your religious affiliation, if any: \_\_\_\_\_
9. What Branch of the Military have you served / are you serving in? \_\_\_\_\_
10. Please list your deployments in chronological order:

**Conflict/Location**

**Dates you were deployed (month/year)**

	to	
	to	
	to	
	to	

11. What type (if any) injuries did you sustain while deployed?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**12. Are you service connected for any of the injuries listed in question #11? If so, at what level?**

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**13. What (if any) mental health issues have you been diagnosed with during or after your deployment(s)?**

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**14. Are you service connected for any of the mental health issues listed in question #13? If so, at what level?**

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**CODE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Demographic Questions (Spouse)**

**1. Age:** \_\_\_\_\_

**2. Race:** \_\_\_\_\_

**3. Ethnicity:** \_\_\_\_\_

**4. Occupation:** \_\_\_\_\_

**5. Please state your religious affiliation, if any:**

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**6. Number of children:** \_\_\_\_\_

**7. Did you have any children while your spouse was deployed? Yes** \_\_\_\_\_ **No** \_\_\_\_\_

**8. If yes, how many?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B**  
**Interview Questions (Final Iteration)**

1. Joining the Military.
  - a. Tell me about joining the military.
    - i. (It is anticipated that questions regarding when they met in the sequence of their service and their age at time of joining will be asked here.)
    - ii. (It is also anticipated that questions regarding spouses' perspective on military service will be gathered here.)
  - b. Why this branch of the military?
  - c. What were your reasons for joining the military?
2. Pre-Deployment
  - a. Tell me about your service before deployment (duties, time commitment, etc.)
  - b. What were your thoughts about being deployed during this time?
  - c. In what ways, if any, was your relationship different prior to deployment(s)?
3. Deployment
  - a. Tell me about when you found out you were going to be deployed.
    - i. Where were you? How did you find out? What was your initial reaction to this? Who did you tell first? How long did you have?
  - b. What was your family's reaction to the news? (spouse, children, extended family)
  - c. Sequence of deployment? (training, in country, etc.)
  - d. What were your duties while deployed?
  - e. What were the most stressful parts of your deployment? (\*this will be handled delicately so as to not push the conversation. This should be what the soldier and spouse are ready and willing to share about his deployment experience.)
  - f. Spouse: what were the most stressful parts of his deployment?
  - g. What were the biggest challenges as a couple/family during his deployment?
  - h. Spouse: What kind of support did you get while he was deployed? What was the source of this support?
  - i. If they have children: How did your children deal with deployment?
  - j. How, if at all, did your faith/spiritual tradition factor into your deployment?
4. Post-Deployment
  - a. Vet: How did you prepare for your return from deployment?
  - b. Spouse: How did you prepare for his return from deployment?
  - c. What were your thoughts about returning from deployment?
  - d. Did you anticipate that it would be different upon your return?
    - i. How?
    - ii. Did your expectations meet reality? How did it differ?
  - e. Same question as d. but from spouse's perspective.
  - f. What did you understand about the issues around post-deployment transition prior to your return?

- g. How (if at all) did the VA or a similar organization help with your return?
  - h. *\*Follow up on questions 11-14 on the demographic questionnaire here.\* Physical and Mental issues sustained as a result of deployment and how they impact their current functioning and relationship.*
  - i. What is an example of a time or circumstance that was particularly challenging upon returning from deployment?
    - i. (ask from both the soldier and spouse perspective.)
    - ii. What, if anything, could have made this circumstance(s) less challenging?
  - j. How has your military service aided you in your professional and personal life?
  - k. If they have children: How did your children deal with post-deployment transition?
  - l. How, if at all, did your faith/spiritual tradition factor into post-deployment?
5. Living in a Small Town
- a. Tell me about your town; what does it mean to be from this town?
  - b. What are the benefits of living in this town?
    - i. (ask from military and civilian perspective.)
  - c. What is an example of challenge living in this town? What, if anything, would you change about it?
    - i. (ask from military and civilian perspective.)
  - d. How does the culture of the military differ from the culture of this town?
    - i. How did you adjust to military culture from rural culture upon entering the military?
    - ii. How did you adjust (or are you adjusting) back to rural culture after deployment?
  - e. Did coming from a small town make it easier or more difficult to transition to military life and deployment? How?
    - i. Did coming from a small town make it easier or more difficult to transition from deployment? How?
6. Additional Remarks
- a. Are there any other areas that we did not discuss that you would like to mention? What am I missing about small town life and military service?
  - b. Are there any areas that we discussed that you would like to discuss further?
  - c. Would you like to provide any suggestions or questions that you feel would be helpful to the understanding of the rural military couple experience?
  - d. Knowing what you now know about your experience what would you change if anything?



Appendix C  
**Recruitment Flyer**

## Volunteers Wanted for a Research Study

### MILITARY COUPLES FROM SMALL TOWNS

I am a psychology Ph.D. student at Seton Hall University, and I am trying to better understand how military couples from small towns adjust from deployment. Right now, soldiers and veterans from small towns do not have a lot of research explaining their unique views, strengths, and challenges. I am trying to fix that by talking with rural veterans and their spouses or partners.

Please read the following points to see if you qualify for this project. If you or your spouse:

- Are male and on active duty or are a veteran of any branch of the U.S. Military,
- Served a combat deployment after 1991,
- Are in a committed relationship with a female spouse or partner for more than one year, and
- Live in a town of 10,000 people or fewer.

Participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may stop at any time no questions asked.

Participation will include:

- Over the phone screening
- A short questionnaire asking about background information.
- An in person interview asking about life in a small town, military history and deployment.

Total participation time will be 1-2 hours.

This study will be ask a lot about the personal experience of the soldier and their spouse. However, proper precautions, such as fake names and codes will be used in place of names to protect confidentiality. Also, all materials with personal information will be kept in a secure location.

Given what the interview questions are about there is chance that you may become uncomfortable. You will only be asked to share what you are comfortable talking about. Proper resources to minimize this risk will also be presented.

Your help in this study will provide valuable information in better understanding small town veterans and their families. Your interest in this project is greatly appreciated.

**If you have questions or would like to be screened for participation in this study please call or e-mail Jeffrey Goulding directly using the provided information:**

XXXXXX@XXXXXX --or-- XXX-XXX-XXXX

**THANK YOU!!**

**Appendix D**  
**Letter of Solicitation**

***Invitation to be in a Study:***  
***Military Couples From Small Towns***

Dear Volunteer:

I am a psychology Ph.D. student at Seton Hall University, and I am trying to better understand how military couples from small towns adjust from deployment. Right now, soldiers and veterans from small towns do not have a lot of research explaining their unique views, strengths, and challenges. I am trying to fix that by talking with rural veterans and their spouses or partners.

Please look at the following points to see if you qualify for this project. If you:

- Are male and on active duty or a veteran of any branch of the U.S. Military,
- Served a combat deployment after 1991,
- Are in a committed relationship with a female spouse or partner for more than one year, and
- Live in a town of 10,000 people or fewer.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may stop at any time with no questions asked. If you meet the requirements and want to be in the study, I will ask you to sign a document stating that you agree to participate, but you may change your mind at any time.

If you choose to be in this study, I will first ask a few questions over the phone. I will then give you a short questionnaire about some of your background information, and then I will set up a time with you and your spouse to be interviewed. Total time will probably be between 1 and 2 hours. I will be asking questions about your experience in the military, what it was like to be deployed and what it is like to be from a small town. I will record the interview and then transcribe the recording. You will have a chance to read the transcript to make sure it is correct, and then I will erase the tape.

This project will be asking a lot about the personal experiences of the soldier and his spouse. However, to protect the confidentiality of you and your spouse, I will use a code that will replace your names on all of the papers and the written record. Any publication of the study will use different names and will change details that could identify you personally. The interviews will be recorded on a digital recorder and then transferred to a USB drive. The USB drive will be encrypted and password-protected and kept in safe locked place. I will be careful to protect your confidentiality throughout the study, and it will be up to you how much you share during the interview.

Some of the questions may be about stressful events. However, you can decide to share only what you are comfortable talking about.

There is no direct benefit for being in the study. However, this study may help doctors, therapists and the military better understand how to help small town vets and their families. Thank you for your time and your interest in this study.

**If you are interested in being part of this project, please contact me using the email address or phone number below:**

XXXXXX@XXXXXX --or-- XXX-XXX-XXXX

Thank you for your time,

Jeffrey M. Goulding, M.A.  
Counseling Psychology Doctoral Student  
Seton Hall University

## Appendix E

### INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

#### Military Couples From Small Towns

##### Purpose of Research

This study is being conducted by Jeffrey Goulding, a psychology Ph.D. student at Seton Hall University, to better understand how military couples from small towns adjust from deployment. Right now, soldiers and veterans from small towns do not have a lot of research explaining their unique views, strengths, and challenges. The purpose of this study is to provide an opportunity for rural veterans and their spouses or partners to share their experiences.

##### Procedures and Voluntary Participation

Veterans and their spouses are invited to participate if they:

- Are male and on active duty or a veteran of any branch of the U.S. Military,
- Served a combat deployment after 1991,
- Are in a committed relationship with a female spouse or partner for more than one year, and
- Live in a town of 10,000 people or fewer.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Participants will be asked to sign at the bottom to confirm their agreement to participate in this study. Participants may stop at any time, no questions asked. A copy of this form will be given to each participant couple.

##### Duration of Research

Participants and their spouses/partners have been screened over the phone, and those who choose to continue and sign this form will complete a short questionnaire. The researcher will then conduct an interview. Total participation time will probably be between 1 and 2 hours. The researcher will be asking questions about experience in the military, what it was like to be deployed, and what it is like to live in a small town. The interview will be recorded. Afterward, the interview will be transcribed and participants will have a chance to read it to make sure it is correct. The recording will then be deleted.

##### Confidentiality

This project will be asking about the personal experiences of the soldier and his spouse. To protect confidentiality, the researcher will use codes instead of names on all written records. Any publication of the study will use different names and will change details that could identify participants. The interviews will be recorded on a digital recorder and then transferred to a USB drive. The USB drive will be encrypted and password-protected and kept in secure place. The researcher will be careful to protect participants' confidentiality throughout the study. It will be up to each participant to decide how much to share during the study.

##### Anticipated Risks and Discomfort

Some of the questions may be about stressful events. However, participants can decide to share only what they are comfortable talking about. If participants become distressed after the interview, there is 24-hour help available at this toll free number: 1-800-273-TALK (8255). For those who want to speak with a

professional, the APA offers free location based referrals at <http://locator.apa.org>. There are also benefits and resources available through the VA at <https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits/nrd>.

### Benefits to Research

There is no direct benefit for being in the study. However, sharing experiences will help doctors, therapists and the military better understand how to serve small town vets and their families. Participation in this research is greatly appreciated.

### Contact Information

Questions about this study can be sent to the researcher (Jeffrey Goulding, [Jeffrey.goulding@student.shu.edu](mailto:Jeffrey.goulding@student.shu.edu)), or his research advisor, Pamela Foley, Ph.D. (973-275-2742; [pamela.foley@shu.edu](mailto:pamela.foley@shu.edu)).

For questions about participant's rights in research, participants can also contact the Director of the Institutional Review Board at Seton Hall University: Dr. Mary F. Ruzicka, Ph.D. at (973) 313-6314.

### Consent to Participate

By signing below, participants agree to participate and have their interview audio-recorded. Participation is voluntary and participants may stop at any time. Each participant couple will receive a copy of this document.

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Print Name (Veteran)

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Signature (Veteran)	Date
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Print Name (Spouse/Partner)

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Signature (Spouse/Partner)	Date
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Appendix F**REQUEST FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH, DEMONSTRATION OR  
RELATED ACTIVITIES INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS**

All material must be typed.

PROJECT TITLE:

Rural Military Couples Post Deployment Transition: A Phenomenological Study

CERTIFICATION STATEMENT:


In making **this application**, I(we) certify that I(we) have read and understand the University's policies and procedures governing research, development, and related activities involving human subjects. I (we) shall comply with the letter and spirit of those policies. I(we) further acknowledge my(our) obligation to (1) obtain written approval of significant deviations from the originally-approved protocol BEFORE making those deviations, and (2) report immediately all adverse effects of the study on the subjects to the Director of the Institutional Review Board, Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ 07079.

  
Jeffrey M. Goulding, MA  
RESEARCHER

10/31/17  
DATE

**\*\*Please print or type out names of all researchers below signature.  
Use separate sheet of paper, if necessary.\*\***

My signature indicates that I have reviewed the attached materials of my student advisee and consider them to meet IRB standards.

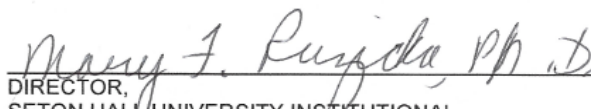
  
Pamela Foley, Ph.D.  
RESEARCHER'S FACULTY ADVISOR [for student researchers only]

10/31/17  
DATE

**\*\*Please print or type out name below signature\*\***

The request for approval submitted by the above researcher(s) was considered by the IRB for Research Involving Human Subjects Research at the Nov. 2017 meeting.

The application was approved ☒ not approved ☐ by the Committee. Special conditions were ☐ were not ☒ set by the IRB. (Any special conditions are described on the reverse side.)

  
DIRECTOR,  
SETON HALL UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL  
REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH

12/5/17  
DATE